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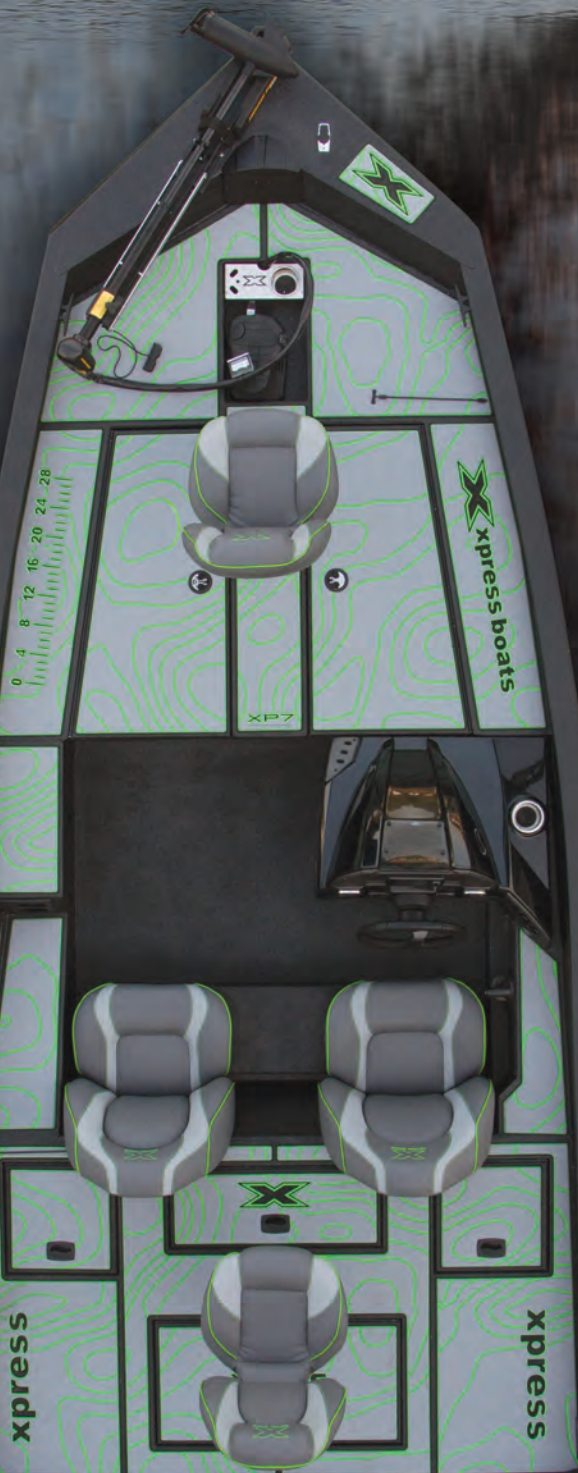
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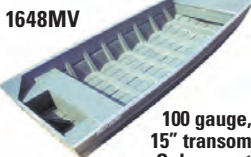
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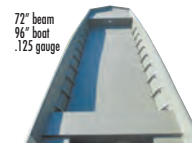


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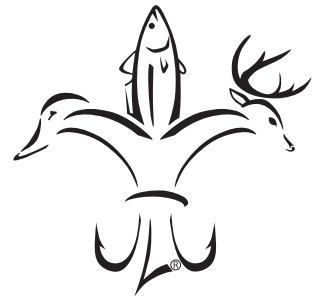




45
Cape Fear's December
mixed bag



23
Cold crappie
kickoff



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Volume 25 | No 12

ON THE COVER:



John McDonald Jr. of Woodruff, S.C., killed this huge Spartanburg County buck on Oct. 14.

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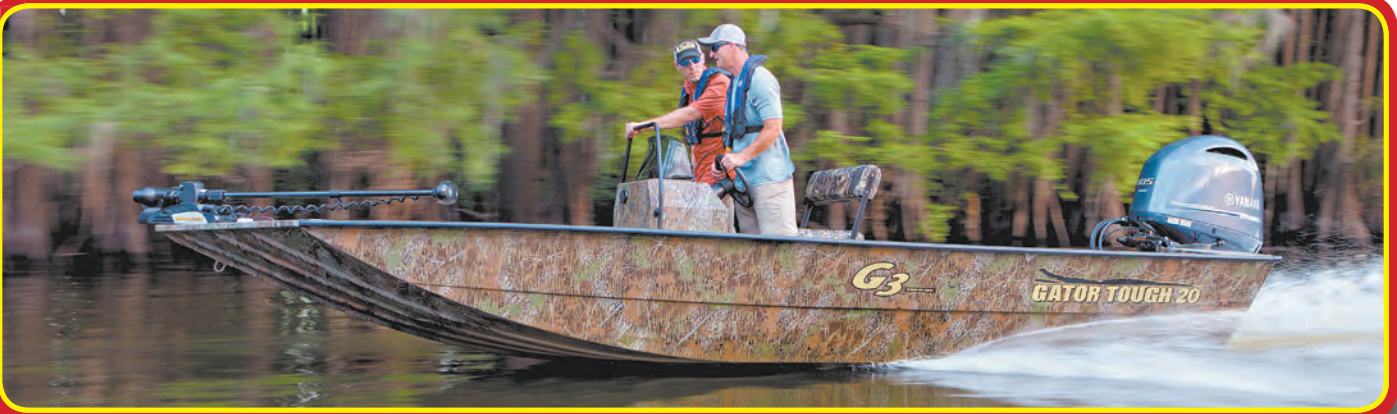
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Outdoor UPDATE

with
Dan Kibler



Alec Robertson of Reidsville, N.C., dropped this 11-point, 212-pound albino buck in Rockingham County on Oct. 27.

WRAP UP DECEMBER WITH A BOW

PLENTY OF HUNTING, FISHING OPPORTUNITIES MARK THE FINAL MONTH

December is really a month for sportsmen to celebrate across the Carolinas. If the season for your favorite game bird or animal isn't open when the 12th month arrives, it will probably open pretty quickly.

Deer hunters in extreme western North Carolina have the first eight days of the month to gun hunt, with a bonus archery season to follow, and bear season is open almost statewide through for at least parts of the month.

Most small-game seasons are in, and parts of goose, duck and dove seasons crank up sometime during December, along with the season on woodcock, those funny little brown birds with the long bills that have a strong-enough odor that any bird dog can point them.

In South Carolina, the third and final segment of dove season arrives on Dec. 15, a week after ducks and geese become legal again. Woodcock season opens Dec. 18.

Through much of North Carolina, the secondary rut will become a factor for deer hunters around the middle of the month in most areas, and a little later in the mountains. The secondary rut will just about be winding up in most of South Carolina when November flips over its calendar page to December.

Fishing remains good across both states, as the last good speckled trout bite cranks up inshore, and the wahoo bite gets good offshore. Depending on the weather and the location of your favorite lake, bass and crappie may still be active for much of December. Stripers love cooler

water, so they're hyped up as Christmas approaches, and big blue catfish have the feed bag on as well.

Fortunately for sportsmen, you can catch or shoot most anything, so those presents you dug out from under the tree can be put to immediate — and good — use. I told the wife and kids I really don't need anything, but an ATV would get put to good use. Now eligible for Social Security, I'm not getting any younger. ■



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

Jeff Kay of Traveler's Rest, S.C., killed this 504-pound Greenville County bear on Oct. 17.

S.C. HUNTER OPENS BEAR SEASON WITH A BIG BANG

Field reporter Brian Cope of Edisto, S.C., posted this story on www.CarolinaSportsman.com on Oct. 24.

Jeff Kay of Traveler's Rest, S.C., killed his first bear on Oct. 17 in Greenville County, a whopper. The bear, taken on opening day of the Upstate bear season, weighed 504 pounds.

Kay has hunted bears for the past nine years, and even though he had seen plenty of sign, he had never seen a bear while hunting, and his encounter with this big bruin was a little bit unexpected after spotting a sow with two cubs earlier in the day.

"I'd been doing some scouting in the area before the season opened, and I'd seen plenty of sign, so I knew bears were in the area, but everything I saw indicated it was

multiple bears of various sizes. So when I saw the sow and cubs in the morning, I figured all the signs I'd been seeing were from them," said Kay.

The sow spotted Kay and quickly sent her cubs up a tree, so Kay decided he would hunt a different ridge that afternoon.

"After seeing those three, I prayed that God would let me see a different bear — one that I could shoot. He did that, and I'm thankful," he said.

His afternoon move paid off. Sitting on the ground and looking slightly downhill on his second hunt of the day, Kay saw the 504-pounder, and he had a shot. He pulled the trigger on his Winchester Model 70 7mm Mag, sending the 175-grain bullet 100 yards to his target. The bear ran a short distance before falling, and Kay put another bullet in the bruin, which finished the job.

"Everybody says you should wait after shooting, but I waited about 20 seconds and couldn't stand it any longer," he said.

Teresa Ard of Andrews, S.C., killed this 540-pound hog on Oct. 27 while deer hunting. She dropped the big boar, which measured 6-foot-2 in length, with one shot from her .270.

[more updates...](#) >



▶ BAG-A-BUCK Contest — underway

Don't forget to post photos of your bucks in Carolina Sportsman's Bag-A-Buck Contest to be eligible to win monthly prizes of great Sportsman swag from the online Sportsman Store.

Log onto CarolinaSportsman.com and visit the Bag-A-Buck link for details.

WOMAN'S FIRST BUCK IS CONTEST WINNER

When Kristin Montgomery of Greensboro, N.C., spied a buck she had never before seen in a round of trail-camera photos in late October, she laid claim to it.

"My husband and a hunting buddy and I hunt on this piece of property, and when this buck showed up on our spy cam, I told them, it was off-limits. I was going to kill it," Montgomery said.

Late on the evening of Oct. 30, Montgomery followed through on her promise. She arrowed the big 11-pointer when it showed up in front of her ground blind, entered it in *Carolina Sportsman's* Bag-A-Buck contest later that night, and the next day, Oct. 31, her entry was drawn as the winner of the October contest.

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

Montgomery was hunting out of a ground blind on property near Staley, N.C., in Chatham County. There was a gravity feeder dropping corn in front of her stand, and a smaller, scrub buck was feeding there around 6:30 on Oct. 30. A few minutes later, the big buck showed up.

"He came walking in, and he walked around the perimeter two or three times. I was afraid he wasn't going to stop," she said.

Finally, the buck stopped in range, broadside at 20 yards, and Montgomery



stuck him right through the boiler room with an arrow from her purple and pink Lady Ranger bow. The buck took off, but she heard him crash to the ground.

"I heard him fall, and I got out to go look for him, but he was making so much noise, I was a little scared," she said. "But about that time, my husband, Jeff, showed up on his 4-wheeler, and we went over and put the lights on him and found him. He had gone about 40 yards."

The buck was Montgomery's first ever, and her first deer with a bow. She has killed several does with a rifle. ■



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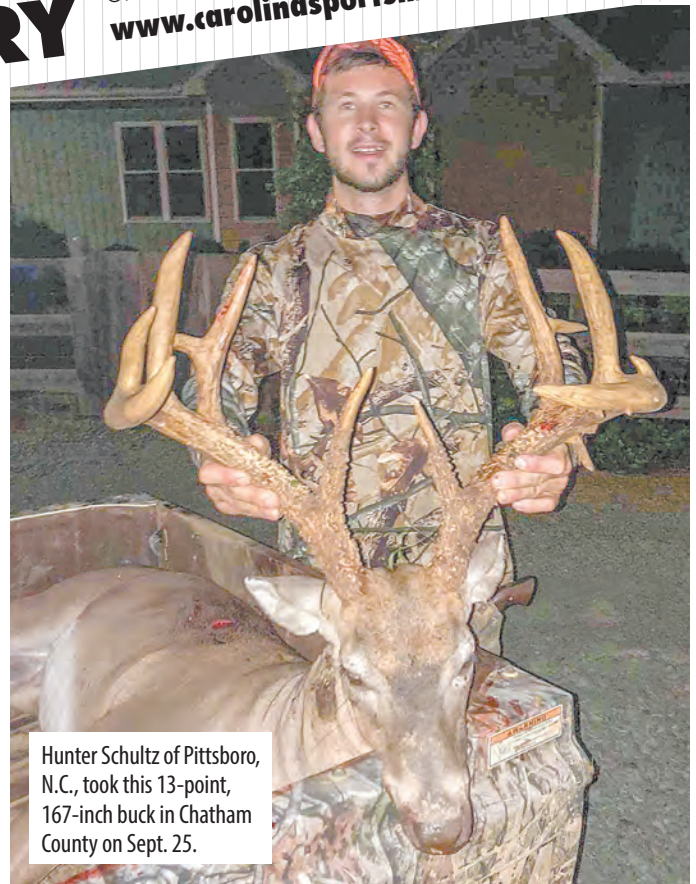
SPORTSMAN'S BIG BUCK GALLERY

To read full stories about any of these trophy bucks, visit www.carolinasportsman.com/bigbucks



ON THE COVER

John McDonald Jr., of Woodruff, S.C., killed this massive 11-point monster on Oct. 14 in Spartanburg County.



Hunter Schultz of Pittsboro, N.C., took this 13-point, 167-inch buck in Chatham County on Sept. 25.



Jason Carter of Snow Camp, N.C., killed this 10-point, 158-inch buck in Alamance County on Sept. 21.



James Williams (left) bagged this 9-point, 133-inch buck in Granville County, N.C., on Sept. 18.

GOT PICS? We want 'em

All images will be considered, but those taken on the water or in the woods will have the best chance of being featured.

Email images to: dank@carolinasportsman.com

*Digital images must be sent in jpeg format. High-resolution images (taken on your camera's highest setting) will work the best. All images (physical and digital) become property of Carolina Sportsman and cannot be returned.



Cason Lee of Johnsonville, S.C. (left), killed this 14-point, 150-inch buck on Oct. 11, in Williamsburg County, one day after his father, Jerry Lee (right) took his 14-point, 150-inch buck in Florence County.



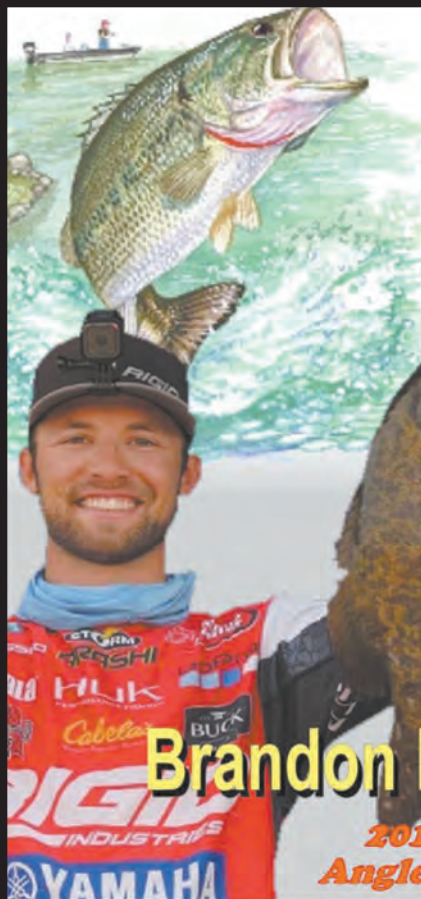
Marty Coward of Johnsonville, S.C., took this 8-point, 21-inch buck on Sept. 21, one of two trophies he took in four days.



Clay Hall of Stoneville, N.C., killed this 13-point, 150-inch Rockingham County buck on Oct. 27.



Jason Lindler of Lexington, S.C., took this 8-point, 140-inch buck in Newberry County on Oct. 26.



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Brandon Palaniuk

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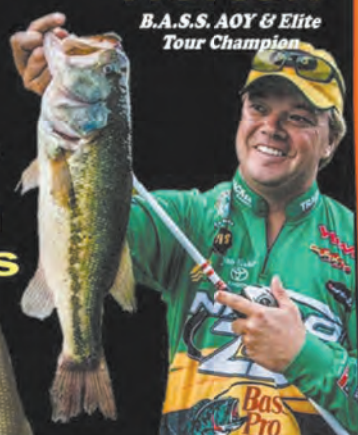
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DEER IN THE 11TH-HOUR

By Pete Rogers

Concentrate on available food sources as whitetail season draws to a close. Hey, they gotta eat...

The temperature hovered around 25 degrees.

As the light began to fade, crystals of frost started to form, and my breath rose into the cold morning air as I surveyed the edge of a field for any movement.

I was sitting on the edge of a late-season food plot. Planted in late summer, it was just beginning to pay off. Brassicas, in this case radishes and turnips planted in late summer, are ignored until late in the season when the frost turns the otherwise bitter leaves to a sugary morsel deer cannot ignore. They will feed on the frost-covered foliage and then dig up the tubers for later consumption. >

Pete Rogers

MY STAND WAS NEAR AN INSIDE CORNER CLOSE

to a bedding area only 200 yards behind me. A crosswind ensured that if the deer followed their normal pattern, they would enter the field with an hour or more of light within 25 yards and give me an easy shot with my Hoyt bow.

Many deer hunters see December as wasted effort. An unscientific poll I took — 15 of my hunting buddies — showed that roughly 85 percent of the hunters I asked, stopped hunting completely by Thanksgiving. Reasons were: “It’s too cold,” and “The deer are so spooky it isn’t worth the effort.” The first excuse is easily remedied with proper clothing and layering systems. The second is just plain false. Deer may be moving in different patterns, but they are not more difficult to hunt; you just have to change your hunting tactics. You cannot hunt deer in December the same way you hunt them in September.

When it comes to 11th-hour deer, one thing is on their mind: food. During the rut, bucks throw caution to the wind in search of love. Later in the season, they want one thing: food. >



Wearing warm, layered clothing and keeping your feet, head and neck covered, will make your time on the stand in December much easier.

STAYING WARM IS A KEY TO SUCCESS

Staying warm late in deer season can be a challenge for many hunters. Cold sits on the stand are not fun, regardless of the time of year.

One tip for staying warm includes remembering to use clothing in layers. Layers trap air, and these air pockets work as insulation. A good wicking merino wool provides excellent warmth next to the skin. Follow this with a good down or polar-fleece vest and wool pants covered with a heavy coat, and you are set.

A lesson learned many years ago is this: if you can keep your neck and feet warm, you can keep your whole body warm. Cool air cools the blood in the arteries just under the skin of your neck as it heads to your brain, making the brain register cold. By wearing a fleece neck gator or scarf, you keep the blood war as it goes to and from the brain, and that helps heats the entire body.

Keeping your feet warm is a greater challenge. Heavy wool socks, insulated boots and in extreme cases, heated insoles are the ticket to keeping your feet warm. A good pair of boots with at least 600 grains of insulation and heavy socks will help. One tip is to put unscented antiperspirant on your feet to keep them from sweating. That helps to keep them warm. Also, boot laces tied loosely keeps blood flow from being restricted and increases warmth.

Don't hesitate to use a heater in your blind if you're hunting from one. Portable propane heaters are a life saver for extreme cold days and can make or break a hunt.

With today's technology, there really is no reason to be cold while hunting. ■

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Recovering from a month of love, they feel the cold and want to pack on the calories. Food, food and more food.

Ralph Cianciarulo, host of “Archer’s Choice,” and “The Choice” television shows, said that, late in the season, he restricts his hunting to afternoons and only hunts around food sources.

“I love standing (soy)beans. If you can convince a farmer to wait to harvest until after deer season, or better yet, offer to purchase an acre or two of his beans and ask him to just leave them standing when he harvests, that is a late-season deer magnet,” he said. “If you are bowhunting, when you plant your crops, plant a large area, and then off to the side find a quarter-acre or so and plant it and hang your stand for the prevailing winds for the smaller plot. The deer will usually visit the smaller plot before going into the bigger one. If you add a water hole, you will double your visits, even in late season. Deer still have to drink.”

Brassicac crops are another food option late in the season. They are a group of perennial broadleaf plants that belong to the mustard family and include cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, collards, rutabaga, mustard, kale, swede, radish, turnip, rape and canola. Of these plants, the latter five are most often used in food plots and seem to be preferred by deer. Planted in cool-season food plots, they can produce up to 10 tons of forage per acre. The most popular in the Carolinas are turnips, radishes and rape.

Hunters who do not have the opportunity to plant food plots or are hunting public land should still focus on food sources late in the season. Find the late-dropping mast trees. Look for alternative foods such as locust or beech; these trees typically drop their mast in different years, but



Soybeans left standing are a great late-season food source for deer in the Carolinas.

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Turnips are a popular item in late-season food plots.

LATE-SEASON FOOD NEEDS A PLAN

Providing late-season food for deer begins in late summer. Planning ahead helps to put the odds in your favor when Christmas is around the corner.

A good mix of brassicas like those sold by Evolved Harvest, Pennington or Bio-Logic is an excellent choice. Choosing a mix, you are ensuring a variety of forage for the deer, but long before the planting, your plot needs to be prepared; that begins with a good soil sample. Most extension offices offer reasonably priced soil-sample evaluations.

The best practice is to take samples of the soil from different locations around your plot and mix them together. Examination of the sample will give you a detailed list of what your soil contains and how to make it better.

Brassicas thrive with soil that has a pH



Pete Rogers

level of 6.0 to 6.5. That points a land manager to start with a fertilizer that is around 46-0-0 at 200 pounds per acre and follow that up with a good 20-20-20 at the same ratio a few weeks after the seeds begin to sprout. This plant nutrition will help you to

get the best bang for your buck.

An old adage my dad used to say when regarding feeding cows is; "The best feed you can buy for your cow is good fertilizer." The same is true for your deer. Feed your plants and let the plants feed the deer. ■

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South-facing slopes that get plenty of sun will get plenty of use by deer when the weather turns cold.



Pete Rogers

the deer know when the food is available and will be drawn to them. So too are some of the less desirable oak trees and hickory. While not as palatable as other acorns, pin oaks, water oaks and willow oaks all produce mast that deer will eat. Spending time learning late-season food sources will put deer in your sights.

Cianciarulo stresses that the drive for food and shelter are higher among all wild animals, including deer, as the season is drawing down. Finding or providing a late-season food source will definitely put the odds in your favor.

The last factor is cover. As winter storms begin to wear on the wildlife, they need cover more than ever. If your land does not provide excellent cover, try making some. Hinge cuts, blowdowns and other features make for great bedding areas for bucks trying to escape winter temperatures. Deer will bed on south-facing slopes to capture the majority of the day's sunlight. South-facing slopes with good, late-season food sources are places to look.

Hunting bucks during the 11th hour can be some of the most productive times to be in the woods. Other hunters are home, the woods are quiet, and the bucks are hungry. Set up on or near a strong food source and let the games begin. ■



Pete Rogers of Taylors, S.C., is employed with the USDA Wildlife Services and has been a sporting writer and photographer for over a decade. He has a real passion for trapping and enjoys sharing his outdoors experiences with his wife and five children.

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Lake Marion slabs can fill a cooler during December as easily as earlier in the fall, if you find them moving toward deeper water in big schools.

COLD CRAPPIE

kickoff

By Terry Madewell



Cool weather and falling water temperatures are a very good combination for December crappie on South Carolina's Lake Marion. Anglers with a good game plan find that crappies begin to congregate into tighter areas around deep-water cover and score outstanding catches.

Guide Dave Hilton said anglers can make a few refinements from the excellent fall fishing and transition into outstanding cold-weather, crappie-catching action.

"Catching crappie from late November through December is not complicated, but it often requires me to be more mobile than at other times of the year looking for fish," he said. "They'll get into tight clusters in specific areas, but when we find them, they're usually stacked in like cordwood." >

Terry Madewell

HILTON, who is from nearby Ridgeville, S.C., has guided clients to great crappie fishing for 28 years. He said the onset of colder water heats up the crappie action, and that patience is a key when searching for that hot spot.

“Using electronics, I work different areas until I can find fish, and it’s common to locate crappie in small and very specific depth and cover situations,” Hilton said. “The primary target for late-season crappies is brush and any other woody cover, whether natural or man-made. I keep brush piles along the base and top of drops and around humps and channels. At this time of year, I’ll begin working brush in water depths where I’ve recently caught fish, but if the action is slow, I’ll quickly start searching and usually will move deeper to find fish.”

Hilton said earlier in the fall, crappie action is often good in the 14- to 18-foot depths, but as the water cools, fish move

progressively deeper in Lake Marion. It’s common for crappies to be in the 18- to 30-foot depth range by December, but it varies year to year based on prevailing weather and water conditions.

“It’s crucial to understand although the trend is (that) crappies will migrate to deeper water if the water temperature drops, not every move is deeper at this time of year,” Hilton said. “Crappies will react to short-term weather changes, and on cloudy and rainy days, especially. Immediately before a frontal passage, the low light and barometric conditions may have fish move slightly higher in the water column for short periods.”

Hilton typically prefers live minnows

DESTINATION INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE — Access Lake Marion by I-26 between Charleston, S.C., and Columbia, S.C., or via I-95, which crosses directly over the lake near Santee providing access to fishing camps on both sides of the lake. The Diversion Canal connects the two lakes and is a prime area for fishing either lake, with fishing camps available for lodging, boat access and tackle supplies. For complete details, visit www.santeecoopercountry.org.

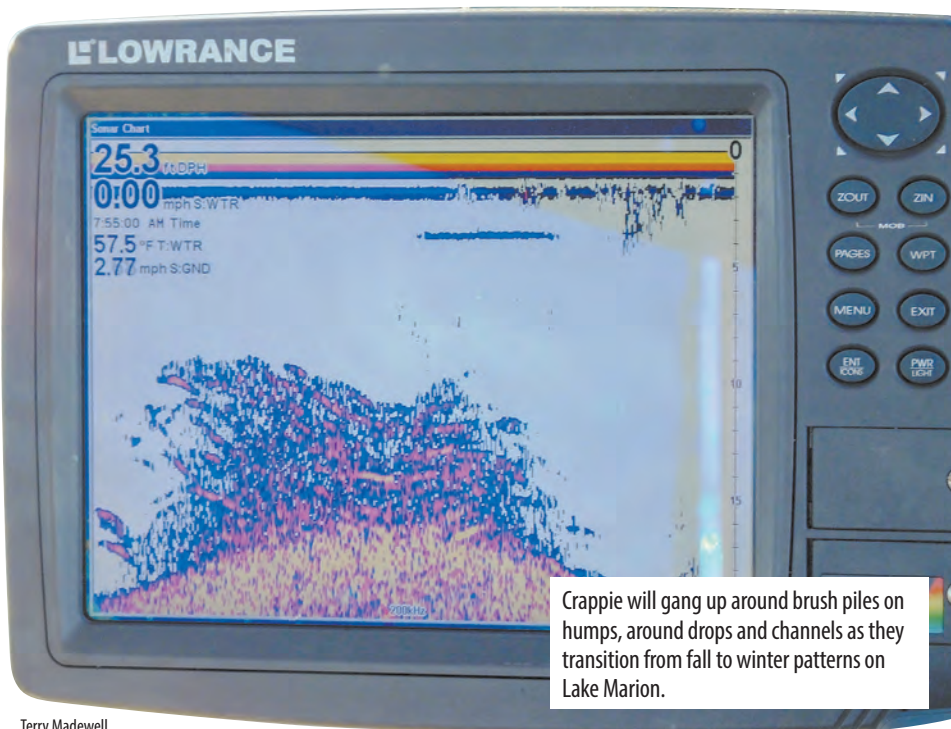
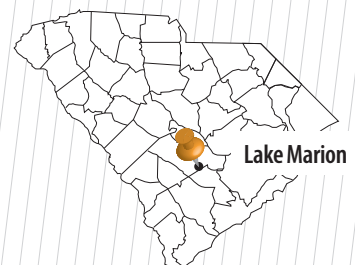
WHEN TO GO — Late season, November and December, is prime time for slab crappie, and limits of big fish is a distinct possibility.

BEST TECHNIQUES — Crappie will orient to woody cover in Lake Marion, both natural and man-made brush piles. Use graphs to find underwater targets and to ensure forage and larger fish are in the area. Use live minnows and vertical fish over and around brush or tight-line multiple rods out of rod holders and work over natural cover such as stumps, logs and fallen trees. Precise depth and boat control is crucial to success.

FISHING INFO/GUIDES — Kevin Davis, 843-312-3080; Dave Hilton, 843-870-4734; Santee Cooper Country, 800-227-8510, www.santeecoopercountry.org. See also Guides & Charters in Classifieds.

ACCOMMODATIONS — Blacks Camp, 843-753-2231, Canal Lakes Fish Camp, 843-753-2271; Santee Cooper Country, 803-854-2131, 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 and Gazetteer, 207-846-7000, www.delorme.com.



Crappie will gang up around brush piles on humps, around drops and channels as they transition from fall to winter patterns on Lake Marion.

Terry Madewell

DECEMBER SLABS: A DEPTH PERCEPTION

Guide Dave Hilton spends a lot of time catching crappie on Lake Marion, and he's learned specific tactics to improve success and describes them in his unique style.

Hilton said post-frontal days typically become more common in December, and crappies will often retreat from the edges of the brush and bury deep in the cover. Despite the potential to snag more often, he wants to get the bait into the cover with the crappie.

"Get the bait into deep, thick cover, so fish can see it," he said. "The good news is that when I get it deep in the brush, it often results in a quick bite. Some of these fish are buried so deep in the brush they'd need a possum for a mailman, so to catch him I know I have to deliver that the minnow right to their mouth."

Hilton said that late-November and through December is prime big-fish time,

but naturally, not all the fish are going to be slabs. Sometimes, changing locations is necessary.

"Crappies are always moving around, and brush piles will consistently hold crappie," he said. "But often the big fish will leave, and other smaller crappies may move in. When the bulk of the fish on a brush pile are small, even if we'd been catching slabs recently, it's time to move to another spot. This happens in the summer as well as winter, but when the crappies we're catching still have milk on their lips, it's time to move."

When fishing brush in any depth of water, Hilton said a lot of things can happen when a crappie is hooked, and only one of them is good.

"Playing a crappie in a brush pile is risky business because about the only good thing that can happen is getting the slab out of the brush, into the boat and in

When fishing on a typical December day — a post-front, bluebird day — make sure to get your minnow right into the brush.



Terry Madewell

the cooler," he said. "Then, you can play with it. To make that happen when the light-biting rascal is hooked, snatch him out of that brush like you're hungry. Some fishermen are so slow the crappie will be drawing Social Security before they get the fish to the boat." ■



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COLD CRAPPIE KICKOFF

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fished vertically over the brush because minnows are a natural food source and are his go-to bait year-round. On the occasions he does use a jig, he will tip it with a live minnow.

"The addition of a minnow on a jig can produce excellent bites in the cooler water," he said.

Kevin Davis, guide and owner of Blacks Camp on the Diversion Canal, said Lake Marion has a great population of crappie, and typically, the fish are on a strong bite in December.

"They'll hit a variety of baits and lures, and often, I'll experiment a bit to find the best bait or lure," he said. "In addition to live minnows, I use two different lures for crappie in late-season."

The first is a Ron's Zip jig, a jighead with a tinsel trailer. He tips the jig with a minnow, he said, for "added enticement."

"On Lake Marion, I'll often use a large minnow because many of the fish are white crappie, and they'll bite a big minnow," he said. "On Lake Moultrie, where I find more black crappie, I'll use the smallest minnow I can find. That's

While live minnows are the go-to bait for many December crappie fishermen, don't forget jigs.

just another trade secret on how different the two lakes can be."

The second is a Rockport Rattler, a jig with a rattling head loaded with a 1½-inch squid-tail plastic trailer; he fishes it without a minnow. He holds the rig in his hands for better feel and lowers it to the right depth, giving it a light twitch every few seconds.

"The lure doesn't need much action, and the rattler in the head does seem to draw the crappie close to check it out — and then they'll bite," Davis said. "Between the two types of rigs, we load up on some of the biggest crappie of the year during late November and December."

The deep-water, brush pile pattern is strong throughout Lake Marion, but in the upper end of the lake, the abundance of natural, woody cover in an overall shallower environment enables anglers to utilize other techniques.



Terry Madewell

Davis said upper Lake Marion is a perfect example of a great opportunity to work natural cover for cold-weather crappie.

"The abundance of woody cover and the myriad of drops, ledges and deep holes provide the diversity needed to find crappie during cold weather," he said. "I'll use the graph to find submerged stump rows or get into standing trees and mark fish. Then I'll spider-rig six to eight rods and use my electric motor or wind drift to work the stumps and trees where crappies are marked. It's highly effective."

He said one final technique in the uppermost end of the lake can be excellent during the late-season.

"Working clumps of matted grass mats in the swamp after an extended warm-weather period can produce a bumper catch of crappies," Davis said. "Use a long pole and a small jig and drop the lure in the small holes and openings in the matted grass. I simply slip the boat into the grass and start fishing all around the boat. I'll move every few minutes until I start catching crappie. This can produce limits of quality fish in a hurry." ■



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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Look for the cleanest water around when you head out in search of speckled trout as fall gives way to winter.

THE CLEAR ADVANTAGE

By Jeff Burleson

All cylinders fire in the Carolinas when offshore and inshore fisheries take off at the end of fall. Offshore waters are dominated by massive grouper, line-stretching tuna and reel-screaming wahoo; the inshore grounds teem with redfish and the Carolinas' most-coveted species, the speckled trout.

These yellow-mouthed brutes live in Carolina waters year-round, and the best fishing is typically between the beginning of fall and at the end of the spring, when the water is cool and clear. Anglers looking for constant speck action need to target clear water and use appropriate tactics. >

Tiny organisms like algae and other types of marine life in microscopic packages play into the dirty water game, and the mud, silt and sand disturbed by wind and heavy tidal currents affect water clarity. Storms, heavy winds and rains degrade it as well. Without them, water would remain clear all the time. Anglers can cure this problem by cranking up and making a move to a different part of the estuary, a different inlet or a different time when tidal conditions permit better water conditions.

In addition, water clarity is directly affected by tidal intensity. Typically, tides will range from a 4½- to a 6½-foot range, depending on the lunar phase. In the Carolinas, the time between the high tide and low tide is generally slightly less than six hours. On bigger tides, more water rises or falls during the same amount of time. The bigger tides produces heavier current that carry more suspended sediment and lead to turbid waters. Anglers can check tide cycles to see the height difference between high and low tides to determine if the water will be disturbed by a heavy current.

Jot Owens, a guide who calls Wrightsville Beach, N.C., home, fishes from Rich Inlet near Figure Eight Island south to the mouth of the Cape Fear River at Bald Head Island. He encounters a wide range of water conditions, and clear water is at the top of his list when he looks for a non-stop trout bite for his clients. He considers winds, tides and past weather cycles to determine the best place to find speckled trout.

“I always look for clearer water,” said Owens (910-233-4139).

“Unless the ocean is dirty, I find the clearest water at the end of the rising tide and at the start of the fall. The water gets dirty after it carries sediment out of the creeks and into the receiving waters.”

Speckled trout are voracious feeders that use their eyesight to earn a living, and clear water is almost required for trout to get enough food to fuel their metabolism.

“Trout have extremely good eyesight, and they use it to their advantage. They will chase baits from a considerable distance, unlike flounder, which don’t like to break their cover, and reds just don’t chase it very far. Trout will come from the bottom in 12 feet of water and attack baits 6 to 10 feet away.”

The colder months are the best months to catch specks, in part because the estuaries are the clearest. This is exactly the case in Wrightsville Beach, where Owens spends most of his fall season chasing speckled trout.

“Our water gets super clear from the end of October through the end of the year,” he said. “The colder it gets, the clearer the water gets.”

continues on page 31 >



TOP: Trout fishing in the Carolinas really improves as the weather cools in the fall, and the cooler it gets, the clearer inshore waters tend to stay, which contributes to the excellent fishing **BOTTOM:** Any one of this handful of soft-plastic and hard-plastic lures will draw strikes from speckled trout.

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Speckled trout live in a lot of the tannic, blackwater coastal rivers of the Carolinas; the water is actually clear below the surface.

DON'T AVOID BLACK, TANNIC WATER

Water color varies greatly along the Carolinas' coastal front, and stained water at the surface doesn't always equate to unsavory conditions down below, especially when it has a blackish tint or is the color of Earl Grey tea. Tannic waters can offer exceptional conditions for speckled trout, and they often produce some whopper trout.

Water color and conditions varies between the greenish/blue waters of Wrightsville Beach, N.C., and the brownish/blackish waters around Georgetown, S.C., or the White Oak River at Snead's Ferry, N.C. Typically, the brown/black water in estuaries are fed by river systems that carry sediment and tannins from upstream to the ocean. The greenish/blue waters lack

a river input and have minor freshwater contributions. The darker rivers are full of tannins and can appear murky and unclear, but most of the time, the tannins in the blackwater systems just stain the water, while the visibility can remain quite good underwater.

The tannic systems actually provide both clear conditions and obscurity above that can give anglers an edge.

Jot Owens, a veteran guide from Wrightsville Beach recommends using colors that show up well in the tannic water.

"In stained water, I like green- and lime-colored lures. The green stands out well in these waters," said Owens. "Pearl/white is a good crossover color for dirty water, clear



Jeff Burleson

water and stained color. It stands out well about everywhere."

Stained water systems looking jet black from above can hold big numbers of trout and should never be avoided. ■

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Because he's been fishing Wrightsville Beach for nearly 30 years, he's learned how to target trout in gin-clear conditions. First, Owens switches to a longer leader: 3 to 4 feet of 12- to 15-pound fluorocarbon. And he downsizes lures to 3-inch soft plastics on 1/8-ounce jigheads and small hard baits.

"MirrOdines, Berkley Powerbait Pro Twitchtail Minnow and 3-inch Ripple Shad are my go-to lures in super-clear water in December," he said.

Owens prefers the smaller presentations of the 3-inch soft baits in clear water. Fish can detect these lures at great distances, and the smaller baits produces more fish than larger lures in the fall and winter. The MirrOdine, 17MR, resembles a small menhaden that suspends a few feet below the surface. It has rattles that can get a fish's attention from great distances. Owens fishes these lures with a stop-and-go retrieve. He prefers pinks, silvers and pearls/whites in soft and hard baits.

"Use lighter colors in clear water and darker colors in darker water," he said.

In clear water, you get a bonus: watching trout react to lures and baits. The greater distance a fish can see, the more likely they will bite, especially a trout. Speckled trout earn a living in clean water, and if anglers can locate these places in their neck of the woods, the fishing can produce good results. For the best luck, speckled anglers need to locate clear water and use clear water tactics to put fish in the boat. ■



Jeff Bursleson 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.

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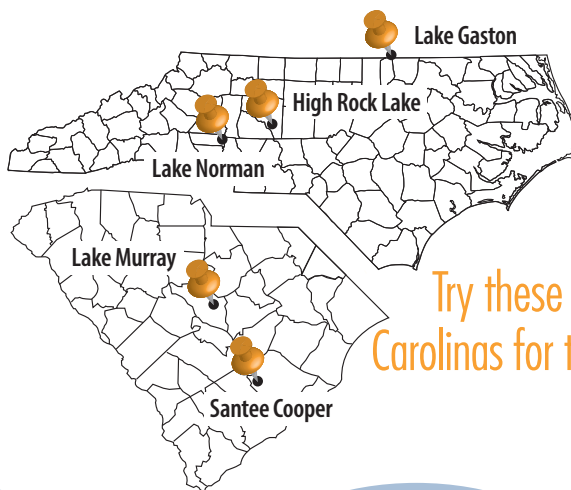


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Try these five lakes in the Carolinas for top cold-weather catfish action.

Winter cats can be

By Terry Madewell

One are the days when catfish were delegated to warm weather and water for consistent fishing. With the introduction of blue catfish into many lakes and rivers in the Carolinas, the cold-weather catfishing game has changed significantly.

Not only are blue catfish active during the cold months, they literally gorge on forage such as gizzard and threadfin shad, as well as white perch so richly abundant in many lakes. This “consuming mass quantities” of forage trait enables anglers to target blue catfish effectively.

Not all lakes are created equal when it comes to blue catfish, and five lakes in the Carolinas stand out as top cold-weather catfish destinations. Take the advice of these experts, and your odds of consistent catches and an occasional trophy will go up.

LAKE GASTON

Perhaps the hottest lake in the Carolinas for trophy blues is Lake Gaston along the North Carolina-Virginia border. Guide Zakk Royce has some basic cold-weather

strategy for big cats, and he’s associated with trophy fish, having put three 100-pound specimens in his boat.

Royce, who runs Blues Brothers Guide Service, said winter — and December in particular — has been very good for big catfish on Gaston. In December 2015, he caught a 91-pound blue that was certified as North Carolina’s state record. Eighteen hours later, he caught a 105-pound blue that broke his own record. He has since caught blues weighing 102 and 100 pounds at Lake Gaston.

Royce (919-724-2474) said targeting big blues in cold weather begins with finding forage, then following up with the right strategy.

“It’s more than just having baits in the water; time on the water encompasses finding and keeping up with big fish movements,” Royce said. “Generally, I like the lower end of Lake Gaston for cold-weather catfish, but I’ll move if conditions dictate.”

Royce said the next component is having the right bait in the right place.





Terry Madewell



The right bait can be a moving target for trophy catfish," he said. "I think it's crucial to use bait that catfish already prefer for a consistent bite. For Lake Gaston, I've found that white perch and gizzard shad are my two basic 'go-to' baits in cold weather. The presentation may change, so I fish a variety of baits, including live, cut chunks, whole heads and fillets from perch or gizzard shad until I find a pattern for that day. From a generic standpoint, blues are predictable eaters but are sometimes picky, so I also experiment with large and small baits. Large baits can be great, but sometimes smaller baits trigger big fish bites."

Royce has a drift-fishing game plan and does not do random drifts.

"Random drift-fishing is not consistent," he said. "On Lake Gaston I'll target points, humps, ledges, channels and creek and river junctions as predictable contact areas during the winter. I look for forage in the area and big fish marks on my graph."

Royce said he primarily drifts for blues during the winter and prefers to use his electric motor to keep the boat exactly where he wants it. His favored wintertime speed is around 0.4 to 0.6 miles per hour.

SANTEE COOPER: **Moultrie, Marion**

The Santee Cooper lakes, Marion and Moultrie, have produced insanely good winter action on blue cats for years, and that pattern continues. Good numbers of fish in the 5- to 15-pound class are available, as well as giant blues. The lakes have solid populations of hefty flatheads and channel catfish, but blues are by far the top winter target.

Guide Linwood Thornhill (843-509-8174), who works out of Blacks Camp on the Diversion Canal between the lakes, said both lakes are productive, but he generally opts for Lake Moultrie during cold months when weather allows. Having access to both lakes does enhance his opportunity for success.

"Wind and strong fronts can make Lake Moultrie difficult to fish because it's so wide open, but when that occurs, the lower end of Lake Marion often provides shelter from certain wind directions and excellent winter fishing," said Thornhill, who believes you can target big cats by looking for big-fish marks on your graph.

"Even when drift-fishing, I want to see catfish targets on the graph," he said. "If I find catfish loaded in a general area, drift-fishing can be awesome."

Thornhill said the key in every instance

is being around a lot of baitfish. Depths will vary, but in December and January, he finds catfish in 25 feet of water — but also as deep as 40 to 55 feet on Lake Moultrie. Fish are generally shallower on Lake Marion. As the water temperature drops, forage patterns change, and he'll adjust accordingly.

"To target really big catfish in cold weather, I like to stay in the deeper water," he said. "Sometimes that's difficult, because drifting shallower water we frequently find fast action. It's not uncommon to catch a cooler of decent-sized catfish weighing 5 to 15 pounds apiece. But the best odds for hooking a trophy catfish are drifting in the deep water."

Thornhill uses a wide variety of baits, but cut mullet, white perch, herring and shad all produce well.

"I give the fish options to determine what's best on a daily basis," he said. "Catfish will bite a lot of different baits, but sometimes big catfish can be finicky, so I'll lay out a buffet for them."

Is High Rock the next catfish CROWN JEWEL?

Badin Lake on the Yadkin River chain in North Carolina has long been known as an excellent lake for blue catfish in the winter, but about 20 miles upstream, High Rock Lake seems poised to become the next winter hotspot.

Guide Chris Nichols said High Rock has long been a catfish factory for big flathead and channel catfish, but the population of blues may be about to explode.

"I'm seeing the same things I saw in Lake Wateree and Lake Wylie as the population of blues expanded so rapidly," Nichols said. "Ten years ago, it was unusual to catch a blue catfish at High Rock, but now, the fishing is really good for blues, and I think in the next three to five years it's going to boom — just like Wateree and Wylie. It good for winter-fishing now, but I believe it's about to get much better."



Terry Madewell

Finding concentrates of baitfish around productive bottom structure is the first step in catching blue catfish.

Nichols said the same basic patterns work at High Rock as at other winter lakes: find shad and underwater topography such as points, humps ledges and channel and blue catfish are available.

"High Rock has a tremendous forage base of threadfin and gizzard shad and loads of perch," he said. "And while they're not caught with regularity yet, some very big blues have been caught and released. Plus, plenty of 15- to 20-pound fish are here now. It doesn't take long when ample numbers of big fish have successful spawns before the population simply explodes." ■

Guide Chris Nichols said High Rock is developing into a top-drawer lake for blue catfish.

Chris Nichols



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LAKE NORMAN

North Carolina's Lake Norman is red hot for blue catfish and is loaded with excellent numbers as well as heavy, top-end sized catfish.

Chris Nichols, who guides for catfish on several lakes in both Carolinas, calls Lake Norman his home lake. He said winter patterns are not difficult to understand.

"Two patterns develop during cold weather, and the key to both is the location of forage," said Nichols (www.thecarolinaangler.com). "In the winter, a lot of forage moves into the larger creeks throughout the lake.

"A perfect scenario is a steady wind from one direction for a couple of days. That usually loads forage in the downwind coves and flats, so those are specific targets to drift. If the area has a hump or point, blues will often gang up on that spot when feeding heavily, but often, it's just a consistent bite over a general area. My drift speed is usually 0.6 to 0.8 miles per hour."

Nichols added that his preferred depths are usually in the 15- to 25-foot range at time of the year. Occasionally, when the wind pushes bait back far in a cove or pocket, he's caught some huge blues in water less than 10 feet deep.

Nichols said a very productive deep-water pattern also develops. "Not all the forage goes to the creeks; a lot of forage moves to deep water, and a significant segment of the catfish population follows," he said. "Catfish will stack up in the mouths of main creeks in water ranging from 30 to 60 feet deep. These fish group in clusters, and they will typically be near the bottom, but the forage often suspends 10 feet or more off the bottom.

"I'll typically drift-fish this target but move slower, usually about 0.5 miles per hour."

Nichols said December through March ranks high as a time to catch a trophy blue. The big-fish bite is more predictable, and blues up to 30 pounds are not uncommon; plenty of 5- to 10-pound cats are landed.

"Lake Norman has some huge catfish, but you can't expect to hook up with those fish on every trip," he said.

Nichols' preferred bait is gizzard shad, but white perch are very productive winter baits.

"Typically, I'll drift with six rods, and I bait a couple rigs with 4- to 6-inch whole gizzard shad for big fish and use 2-inch chunks of cut gizzard or perch on other rods."

LAKE MURRAY

Catfishing is productive and popular year-round at Lake Murray, but December and into the New Year is prime time for excellent action on blues, with an ample number of chunky channel cats caught as well.

William Attaway, who guides for catfish on several lakes, focuses on Lake Murray during the winter for blues, but the big population of channels ensures catches in good numbers.

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Lake Norman has an excellent population of big blue catfish, and winter is a great time to catch them.



Terry Madewell

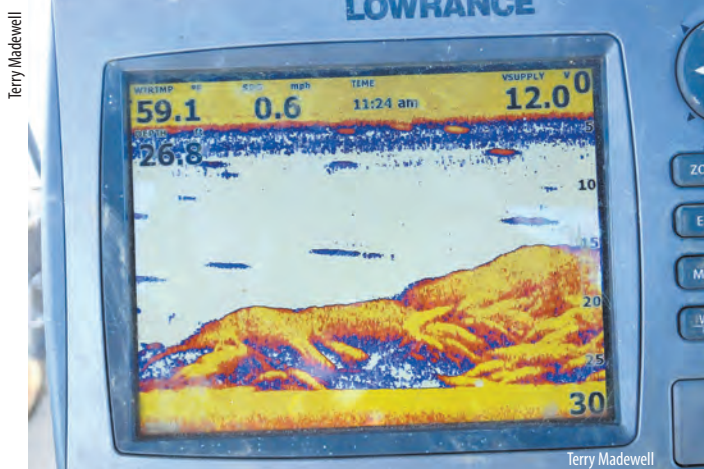
It's all about **THE FORAGE**

A recurring theme among all the catfish guides is that winter catfishing is all about the forage; you fish close to forage or you don't catch fish.

"It doesn't matter which lake you fish," said Chris Nichols, who is based in North Carolina and guides on several lakes in both Carolinas. "To be consistently successful on cold-weather catfish, particularly quality fish, fishing around forage that's readily available is crucial. Not all of the areas where you find forage will hold catfish, but most winter catfish hot spots will have readily available forage."

Another key forage consideration is having the preferred forage base as your bait offering. Zakk Royce, a record-setting North Carolina guide, said if catfish are feeding on threadfin or gizzard shad, for example, it's best to use shad as a primary bait. And he said big catfish will chow love to down on "second-hand" shad.

"Forage for catfish bait goes beyond the simple thinking of smaller forage such as shad," Royce said. "Threadfin shad attract white perch in big numbers, and catfish will readily chow down on perch that are eating shad. So I have perch available as a primary bait as well as shad. Big blue catfish are high on the predator chain, and they love to eat the things that eat shad."



When searching for catfish in the winter, make sure you find plenty of forage in an area before putting your baits down.

William Attaway, who guides on a handful of South Carolina lakes, said he takes a few minutes to graph an area for both forage and big fish marks indicative of catfish.

"It all really boils down to forage," Attaway said. "I ensure I see lots of forage on my graph in addition to what I believe are catfish marks near the lake bottom when I set up to drift. I may find forage and catfish in a creek one day, near a creek mouth another day and in the main river the next trip. Or I may find them in all of the above places on a single day. Follow the forage for winter blues." ■

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It's definitely my favorite time of the year on Lake Murray to consistently catch big blues," Attaway said. "While targeting blues, the same tactics will enable us to catch a number of channel catfish, most in the 5- to 10-pound class. We'll have a mixed bag of catfish most days, and many of the blues will be 10 pounds or better, and it's not unusual to catch them in the 20- to 30-pound class and occasionally much larger."

Attaway (803-924-0857) will primarily drift-fish, and his primary focus will be upper end of the lake, from Dreher Island upstream. His primary targets are points, ledges, humps and channels.

"Regardless of the specific target I'm fishing, I use my electronics to find forage in the area first," said Attaway, who uses a typical drift rig with

Cut white perch is a great bait for blue catfish, but a number of different baitfish will work in different situations.



Terry Madewell

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an 8/0 Gamakatsu circle hook, 40-pound Berkeley Big Game for his main line and a 50-pound monofilament leader. He places a 2-inch float on the leader about 18 inches above the hook to keep the bait off the bottom.

"I'll use different weights depending on the depth fished, but usually 1 to 2 ounces works," he said. "I'll fish from 25 feet down to 45 feet at times. My favorite baits during the winter are gizzard shad, blueback herring and white perch."

Attaway said the best speed to drift on Murray during the winter will vary from 0.4 to 0.7 miles per hour.

"I vary the speed each day until I get that figured out," he said. "Some days, it makes little difference as long as it's in that range, but on some days, the exact speed can be a real key to success. Being near the edge of the creek or river or actually in the channel is important on most days." ■



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.



By Jeff Burleson

DECEMBER DUCK-TIME

Don't wait for New Year's. Some of the Carolinas' best duck hunting is when seasons are open in late November and December, because birds are arriving daily — and they haven't gotten smart yet.



For 60 days, waterfowl hunters in the Carolinas invest time and money into leases, impoundments, decoys and calls to pop a limit of winged migrants on a day-off from work.

But too much effort is expended on the last 3½ weeks of the season, when that portion of the season in late November and December may bring better returns and less disappointment. Ducks without much education are flooding into the Carolinas during these late-fall days, and hunters can put their large arrays of decoys and calls to work.

The migratory behavior of ducks makes it tough to lock down a time and place for a successful hunt. Unlike deer, which have a confined home range in one zip code, ducks and geese travel thousands of miles every year, from the prairie pothole region of Canada to the southern United States and Mexico along one of the four North American flyways.

Ducks begin migrating in September when the hours of daylight beginning shortening. But a family group of mallards will not take flight in Ontario and head straight to Glades County, Fla., without making a few pit stops along the way for groceries, rest and relaxation. Waterfowl hunters count on ducks taking a few days off and hope to keep them for as long as possible before they head further south.

Besides specializing in the sale of hunting land in northeastern North Carolina, Bryan DeHart of Mossy Oak Properties in Manteo, N.C., is a diehard duck hunter who keeps abreast of duck movements in the region throughout the season.

“November and December can be some of the best hunting of the entire season,” said DeHart (252-473-8632). “But they tend to be on the move, and they may only stay for a short period of time. You have to hunt them while they are there.”

November and December are peak months for migratory waterfowl movement. Not only does photoperiod trigger migrations, a full moon and/or a harsh cold front will send ducks southward. Ducks flood into Carolina swamps, impoundments and waterways — and anywhere that has food, water and protection.

“When they show up, they arrive on empty and are likely to hone in on a rich food source,” DeHart said.

Upland impoundments, moist-soil areas, beaver ponds and shallow-marsh areas will generally attract more incoming migrants due to the abundance of food. But the best part of



CAROLINAS DUCK SEASONS

North Carolina:
Nov. 10-Dec. 1, Dec. 15-Jan. 26, 2019.

South Carolina:
Nov. 17-24, Dec. 8-Jan. 27.

ABOVE: Beaver ponds, impoundments and other bodies of water will attract ducks if there is food and cover available.



Jeff Burleson

Hunters in the Carolinas have a wealth of opportunities to hunt ducks during November and December.

should not have any reason to expect anything different.

When migrating flocks head south, they generally depart in massive groups. When they get to a stopping point, they are looking for a familiar sight or large accumulations of birds. Rivers, lakes, sounds and large beaver ponds will attract these large flocks; a spread of decoys and a couple of motion decoys can attract birds. But it doesn't mean smaller swamps or a flooded cornfield will not bring their fair share of birds.

Ducks prefer to stay in large groups, but by mature, migration will typically segregate birds into smaller flocks along the route. Regardless, incoming birds will be looking for company, and a variety of decoys and calls will bring home the bacon.

"The later you get in December, with good weather patterns, we see migratory birds showing up almost on a daily basis," DeHart said.

Again, ducks may come into an area and stay from a few days to a few weeks before they feel the itch to move on. Hunters get the advantage of decoying new birds on a frequent basis.

Most duck hunters concentrate on the January season, and while late-season waterfowl hunting can be very productive, birds are well educated by that time and not as likely to be fooled by decoys and calls. While the birds are fresh, duck hunters need to put in their days throughout December for some of the best wing shooting of the year. ■

MONITOR ROOSTS UP NEXT >

a late November or December arrival is the naïve nature of these incoming flocks. These ducks are fresh arrivals, right off the nursery grounds, with their guards down. The classic tricks-of-the-trade will bring these birds into gunning range with ease.

"Ducks are receptive to larger spreads, motion decoys and less-than-perfect calling," DeHart said.

Not only do ducks travel in flocks, they travel in family groups. Often, the members of a small flock of birds were hatched together and have spent their entire lives traveling to feed and roost as a group. These familial bonds can be their downfall, especially during the peak of migratory activity before dodging steel is a daily survival tactic. Plenty of things will work well for getting ducks into range in late November and December when the season is open. Big decoy spreads, aggressive calling and motion decoys should be used, and hunters

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Keep up with the number of ducks showing up on roosting areas to predict when hunting will be the best.

MONITOR ROOSTS FOR MIGRANTS

The habitual behaviors of waterfowl give hunters a unique set of tools to monitor the location and distribution of birds, especially when migratory movements are peaking.

Ducks roost at night, and typically in the same location every night. Hunters can monitor roosts in the evening to get a firm reading on the abundance of incoming birds into the area.

While most duck hunters look for heavily used feeding spots for an early morning shoot, roost areas are just as important to identify as feeding areas. Ducks roost on

both large, open waters and in protected or sheltered habitats. Typically, diving ducks roost on big water where there is safety in numbers. The majority of puddle

ducks choose sheltered habitats with cover for protection under night-time skies.

Duck hunter Bryan DeHart of Manteo, N.C., said roost sites are important resources to monitor during the season when the migration is in full swing.

"You can monitor roost sites, where the numbers increase day by day in December," DeHart said. (252-473-8632) "If you have access to an impoundment, these areas will normally hold a ton of birds at night."

Most puddle ducks will roost in large, corn-filled impoundments and tree-filled swamps with canopy cover.

"We call it, 'watching the show.' You can definitely tell when a new group of birds has arrived when watching these roosts," he said. ■



Jeff Burleson

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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.



The waters around Wilmington, N.C., are popular with anglers year-round, but they are especially nice to fish in December, when striped bass are added to the mix.

CAPE FEAR'S DECEMBER **MIXED BAG**

By Jerry Dilsaver

Jerry Dilsaver

As he pushed away from the boat ramp in the Dram Tree Park in Wilmington, N.C., Rennie Clark's plan for a chilly, slightly cloudy fall day, was first to target stripers in the Northeast Cape Fear River, then head to the Cape Fear River for trout and red drum.

That's the kind of action anglers can expect in the Cape Fear area in December, where the weather is typically nice enough to produce a good, late-fall trout and redfish bite, with stripers making their first appearance as winter approaches — and once in a while, an incidental flounder for the cooler.

Cutting his outboard and using his trolling motor to ease within casting range of the bank, Clark pointed out several dead trees and tide swirls off points in the marsh grass as likely places for stripers to get a break from the current while waiting for the falling tide to sweep bait past.

He started by casting a Category 5 paddletail and using a medium retrieve. After a couple of minutes, his rod tip bounced, and he set the hook. The fish took off down the bank far enough that Clark thought it might be a red until it swung away from the bank and into deeper water, revealing it to be a striped bass, and he finally got it to the boat.

The striper was tagged, and Clark recorded the tag so he could report it to the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries before releasing it as a moratorium on stripers in the Cape Fear required.

Clark caught a second smaller striper, then decided to make a move as the tide fell, heading to a creek mouth where a rice ditch ran into the river. That creek produced a couple of stripers before he moved to the junction of the Cape Fear and another tributary, the Brunswick River, to look for trout or puppy drum, then moved even farther down the river to fish saltier water in the Snow's Cut area.





That change produced a few reds and a speck, and once the tide was right, he headed into one of his favorite creeks, making the twists and turns between exposed oyster rocks and dry, mud flats for several minutes before gliding to a stop.

“We’ll creep in real slowly to where a oyster rock drops off pretty steeply into a spot where another small creek runs into this one,” Clark said. “There should be drum feeding shallow around the edge of the oyster rock and maybe trout or black drum in the deeper water where the oysters run out into the creek.”

The results were instantaneous. Clark flicked his paddletail to the edge of the oyster rock and gave it a light twitch, then another, before his rod bent deeply. The fish ran up the creek and then made a boil on the surface, showing its tail and identifying itself as a red.

“This guy is clear; cast right over to the edge of the oysters,” Clark instructed a member of his fishing party. “Now, just lightly twitch it so it will drop down the edge of the oysters and get ready. This one hit as the bait was sinking, and I’m pretty sure there are more here.”

continues on page 48 >



December weather, at least early in the month, is conducive to a good speckled trout bite in Cape Fear River and nearby waters.

Jerry Dilsaver



Plenty of fish species, like this red, migrate up and down the Cape Fear River depending on where the freshwater-saltwater edge is located.

Jerry Dilsaver

Fish that edge

The Northeast Cape Fear joins the Cape Fear River beside the battleship North Carolina near downtown Wilmington, and the Black River flows into it about 10 miles upstream. The rivers combine to drain much of central North Carolina. The Brunswick River is another option, but it is basically a thoroughfare that branches off the Cape Fear just upriver from Wilmington and rejoins it across from the N.C. State Ports facility.

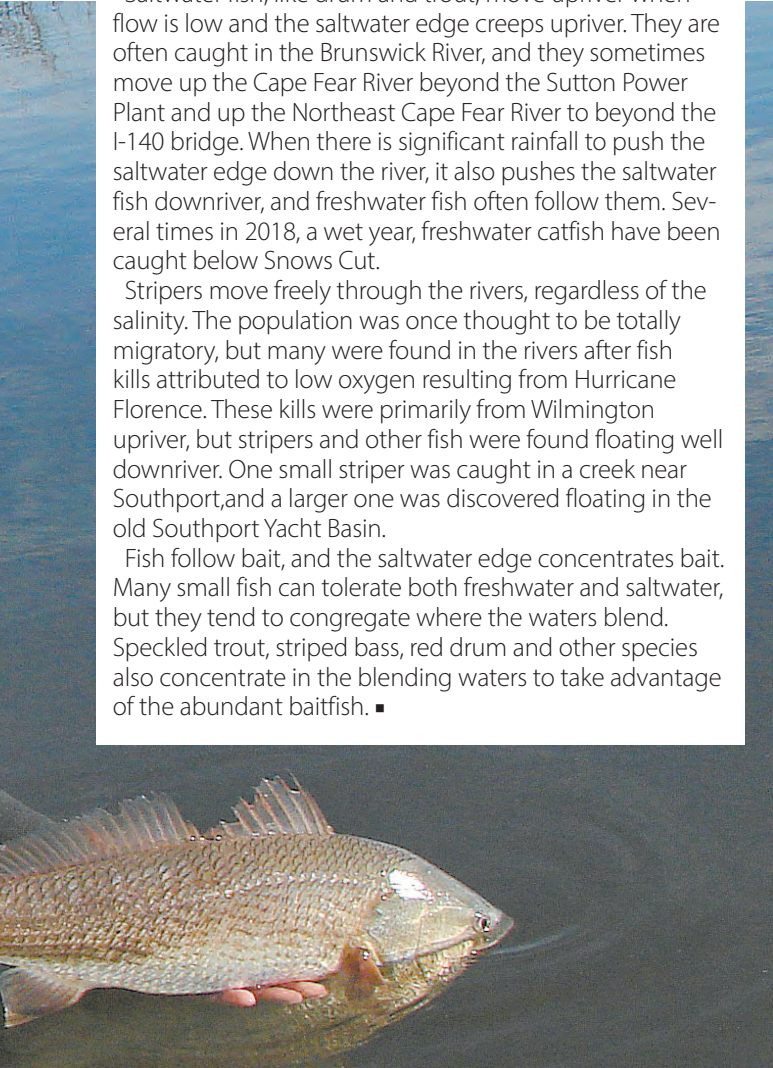
At times — after a hurricane, for instance — there is an overabundance of freshwater flowing down these rivers. But during times of drought and near-drought conditions, the flow slows dramatically. While the legal boundaries for coastal and inland waters don't change, the salinity level in the rivers fluctuates, and fish move up and down the rivers with it.

The rivers are tidal to well upstream of Wilmington, and tidal movements affect the salinity as well as the feeding habits of fish as currents move bait around and the tidal stage controls access to many areas.

Saltwater fish, like drum and trout, move upriver when flow is low and the saltwater edge creeps upriver. They are often caught in the Brunswick River, and they sometimes move up the Cape Fear River beyond the Sutton Power Plant and up the Northeast Cape Fear River to beyond the I-140 bridge. When there is significant rainfall to push the saltwater edge down the river, it also pushes the saltwater fish downriver, and freshwater fish often follow them. Several times in 2018, a wet year, freshwater catfish have been caught below Snows Cut.

Stripers move freely through the rivers, regardless of the salinity. The population was once thought to be totally migratory, but many were found in the rivers after fish kills attributed to low oxygen resulting from Hurricane Florence. These kills were primarily from Wilmington upriver, but stripers and other fish were found floating well downriver. One small striper was caught in a creek near Southport, and a larger one was discovered floating in the old Southport Yacht Basin.

Fish follow bait, and the saltwater edge concentrates bait. Many small fish can tolerate both freshwater and saltwater, but they tend to congregate where the waters blend. Speckled trout, striped bass, red drum and other species also concentrate in the blending waters to take advantage of the abundant baitfish. ■



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- Guide Rennie Clark likes to target stripers in
- the Cape Fear River once December arrives
- and the weather really begins to cool.

The magic worked again, and a double was on — the first of several with fish that were hungry and not bashful. With the tide rising, Clark headed for a large bay, looking for reds and trout. He found several schools feeding actively enough to announce their presence, but they were spooky, so he moved to a spot roughly halfway in between where the fish had been working and lowered his Power Pole.

“These fish get beat up on a lot,” Clark said. “That’s why they’re so spooky. I think if we sit here and don’t move or make any noise, they’ll work back into casting range. Stand as still as you can and let’s see.”

In about 10 minutes, the first school showed again. Just as it reached casting range, a second school began rippling the surface just out of range. Clark told his angler to wait a little longer until the second school got into within range, and when it did, he gave the go-ahead.

Immediately, there was a double hookup — one fish off the stern and one off the bow. ■



Jerry Dilsaver of Oak Island, N.C., a full-time freelance writer, is a columnist for *Carolina Sportsman*. He is a former SKA National Champion and USAA Angler of the Year.



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- Although fish kills followed hurricanes
- Florence and Michael, a number of species
- appeared to rebound very quickly.

Will hurricanes' effects on fishing be long-lasting?

The Cape Fear area was hit hard by Hurricane Florence this fall, and then the remnants of Hurricane Michael added plenty of runoff a few weeks later. The full assessment of the damage and how these storms will affect fishing is ongoing, but one positive was that redfish and specks were feeding within weeks. Another is that no fish-consumption advisories have been issued.

Chris Stewart of the Wilmington office of the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries said his agency's primary concern was for striped bass in the Cape Fear River. Stripers were a major part of several fish kills immediately after Hurricane Florence, from as far inland as Wallace, where the Northeast Cape Fear flooded I-40. When the water receded, stripers, bass, catfish, bream, gizzard shad, eels and other species were left on the roadway and in the ditches.

Another large kill occurred over several days as high tides overflowed into Battleship Park across the Cape Fear River from Wilmington. Many of the same species, plus striped mullet, moved into shallow waters of the park, apparently searching for water carrying more dissolved oxygen, before falling water left them stranded. Many fish were observed at the surface, gasping air, a sign of low dissolved oxygen in the water.

An electroshocking trip done by UNC-Wilmington's Marine Biology Department in mid-October only produced a few fish, and the results were attributed extremely low dissolved-oxygen levels. NCDMF tests confirmed this.

Stewart said biologists have special concerns with striped bass; a restocking program has been ongoing for several years, and this has the potential to be a big setback. This is likely to be a slow season for Cape Fear



Jerry Dilsaver

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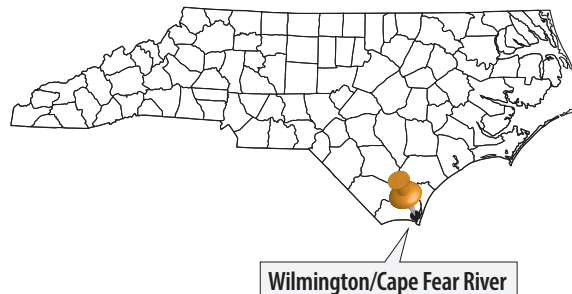


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HURRICANES' EFFECTS ON FISHING CONTINUED ▾

stripers, and not a particularly good one for other species, but they typically recover more quickly.

Stewart said a bright spot was there were very few red drum, speckled trout and flounder in the fish kills. There have been good catches at Wrightsville Beach and near Southport since the hurricanes; biologists believe these fish moved downriver before the dissolved-oxygen levels dropped to critical levels. Another concern is how long the dissolved-oxygen levels will remain low and the fish will remain displaced.

Cape Fear River Watch and Waterkeeper Alliance have both reported that testing has found highly elevated levels of heavy metals in the Cape Fear River around Wilmington. They link the increased levels led to flooding that overran Sutton Lake, a cooling reservoir for the Sutton Electric Plant just outside Wilmington, and the coal ash storage impoundment beside it. Duke Energy said that its tests show levels within the standards for drinking water.

The bottom line is, the after-effects from Florence and Michael will affect fishing for a while, but no one has a time line for when all the damage will be known and how the recovery will proceed. The good news is fish began biting farther down the river soon after the storm and that has been improving. ■

DESTINATION INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE — Brackish water and saltwater in the Cape Fear River begin at Wilmington and extends downriver to the ocean. I-40, US 421 and US 17 are the best highways to access the area. A downtown boat ramp is at Dram Tree Park on Castle Street, and a downstream ramp is at Carolina Beach State Park off I-40 on the ICW.


WHEN TO GO — Red drum and speckled trout are in the Cape Fear River year-round. Stripers join them for the winter and spring, usually arriving beginning in late November and staying through May.

BEST TECHNIQUES — Light-medium to medium-action, 7-foot spinning outfits are preferred, but baitcasting tackle will also work. Spool reels with 15-pound braid and tie on a foot or two of fluorocarbon leader. Anchor up outside creek mouths or around bridge pilings and cast to them using soft-plastics, topwater plugs and suspending baits.

FISHING INFO/GUIDES — Rennie Clark, Tournament Trail Charters, 910-465-8943, www.tournamenttrailcharters.com; Tex's Tackle, Wilmington, 910-791-1763, www.texstackle.com; Island Tackle & Hardware, Carolina Beach, 910-458-3049, www.island-tacklehardware.com; Intracoastal Angler, 910-392-3500, www.intracoastalangler.com. See also Guides & Charters in Classifieds.


ACCOMMODATIONS — Best Western Inn at the Coastline Convention Center, Wilmington, 800-617-7732, www.coastlineinn.com; MainStay Suites, Wilmington, 910-392-1741, www.mainstaywilmingtonnc.com; Sleep Inn, Wilmington, 910-313-6665, www.sleepinwilmingtonnc.com; Cape Fear Convention and Visitors Bureau, 877-406-2356, www.cape-fear.nc.us.


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Brian Cope

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The following gifts are suitable as stocking stuffers, but they can also be wrapped up under the tree or set out as gifts from Santa Claus himself.

Lures are great choices for stocking stuffers, and one sure to be a hit is the Double Plopper from River2Sea Lures. A cousin of the Whopper Plopper, the Double Plopper has two buzzing segments; it's designed more like a buzzbait than a topwater plug. It's available in two sizes. For info, www.river2seausa.com.

Fishing line is another good stocking

stuffer. Braid is always a welcome addition to any angler's reels, and PowerPro Super8Slick is a premium braid that's marketed as the smoothest, softest, longest-casting line ever made by PowerPro. It's available in a range of sizes from 10-pound test all the way up to 80-pound test. Visit www.powerpro.com.

Slime Line is a top-notch monofilament and one of the newer brands on the market. This North Carolina-based company boasts a strong following among crappie and catfish anglers, and it is gaining a following among inshore anglers as well. The line is available in a range of sizes, and in two colors — ultra clear and high visibility slime green, which almost glows. Check out www.catchthefever.com/slime-line.

Jigheads fit nicely in stockings, and ProBuilt Jigs are premium American-made essentials that will be a welcome

addition to any inshore angler's tackle bag. The holographic eyes stand out and give gamefish a definite target. They are available with standard hooks or sickle hooks, many different colors, and range in size from 1/64- on up to 1/4-ounce.

Z-Man Trout Eye jigheads are another great option. With large 3D eyes and super sharp hooks, these jigheads are available with or without a weed guard and are available in weights from 3/16- to 1/4-ounce. For info, www.zman.com.

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REEL 'EM IN

You can never go wrong by gifting a quality spinning reel to any angler, and the Shimano Stradic Ci4+ will put a Christmas smile on any angler's face. Available in a 1000 size for targeting everything from spots to specks, on up to a 4000 for battling big redfish, these reels are corrosion resistant, extremely lightweight, super strong and silky smooth.

Shimano's Tranx 200 is another great gift idea. Available in a 200 size for the first time, this reel is built for the rigors of saltwater and is small enough and light enough to make casting Super Spooks, Trout Tricks, D.O.A. Shrimp, Redfish Magic lures, or live bait easy and enjoyable for any angler. Available in three different gear ratios, the Tranx 200 sports 13 pounds of maximum drag, which will make quick work of everything from sheepshead to bull redfish. For info, fish.shimano.com

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great for kayak anglers or boat-bound anglers alike. You might need to get a bigger stocking to stuff this one in, but anything that can save a life is worth it. www.mustangsurvival.com. ■



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.

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LUNKER LINES

David Fritts

Want to catch a striped bass on a deep-diving crankbait? December is a great month, because fish will be shallow, often schooling with largemouths.

DOUBLE DOWN IN DECEMBER

LARGEMOUTH, STRIPERS CAN MAKE FOR A GREAT LATE-FALL, EARLY WINTER DAY

I have always enjoyed fishing in December, in part because so many fishermen are in deer stands that the lake can seem like it's almost deserted. I can remember fishing a lot in November and December when there was very little fishing pressure on a lake. I had some of my best days ever fishing at Buggs Island in December.

One of the things that makes December a great month to fish is that, on lakes that have both largemouth bass and striped bass, you can often catch them together, and both species will often be up in relatively shallow water. Of course, this depends on the weather, how the season is going. Until it gets really cold and the fish move to deep water, you can catch them on the same places on the same lures. Get in the right place and

you can make a cast and not know what's going to bite — but when they bite, you sure know what you've got right away.

This month, two basic patterns are going to work. There will be a lot of fish shallow, back in the creeks, that haven't come out because the baitfish are back there. They'll be relatively shallow, 10 to 15 feet deep. I can remember way back in the day, when the deepest-running crankbaits we had were a Bagley DB-3 and Model 8A Bomber. They would run down to about 15 feet, and we could catch stripers and bass on them. But now, baits have changed, everything has changed.

When you find them back in creeks, a lot of the time, it will be on up in the day before they come up good. You want to be fishing channel banks, too, places where you can sit in 10 feet of water and

throw to the bank. If you're sitting in five feet and making a long cast to the bank, that's not the deal.

STICK-OUT PLACES

The other thing you're going to be looking for will be long points, long flats, road beds — anything that extrudes extra-far out into the lake. If you find bait on them, you'll find schools of bass and stripers.

At this time of year, bass and stripers both like hardbottoms, any areas with rocks or riprap or shale. Anything rocky is better than not. Rocks hold heat a little better than other kinds of bank, and that draws baitfish and bass. The deeper the water is, the less heat they hold; that's why you'll find fish up shallow, and that's why roadbeds are so good in December,

Dan Kibler

because you've got an extremely hard bottom and shallow water next to deep. **BIGGER BAITS ARE BEST**

When I'm fishing these kinds of places, I like baits that are a little on the bigger side, but not great big. I like to stick with 3-inch baits like a 17.5 or 20.5 Dredger. I'll fish them on one of my Lew's David Fritts Perfect Crankbait rods, a 7½-foot model, medium heavy, with a BB-1 reel. I like to fish crankbaits on Berkley X9 Crystal braid in 10-pound diameter. That's plenty big enough for stripers, because the 10-pound diameter is equal to 30-pound test. If you opt for monofilament, I'd fish 10-pound test.

One thing you don't need to forget is your heavy metal. I always have a jiggging spoon tied on when I'm in an area where I think I've got a chance to tangle with a striper. You can fish them deeper than crankbaits if you need to, or you can just offer them out there as an opportunity. I like to fish a Hopkins 150 Shorty. I don't think it matters whether or not there's a feather tied in on the hook. I'll fish the spoon on the same tackle. The only difference is, if I'm using monofilament, I'll have 20-pound test spooled on my reel.

If the weather stays nice, you can catch bass and stripers together all the way through the month. Real cold weather will be them down. While they're up, take advantage of the opportunity. ■



David Fritts is a 61-year-old pro bass fisherman from Lexington, N.C. He won the 1993 Bassmasters Classic champion 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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GREENER PASTURES

Jeff Burleson

Fall food plots, with plenty of greenery, are prime spots to encounter deer when winter weather arrives in the Carolinas.

FOOD PLOTS SHINE AS WINTER ARRIVES

COLD WEATHER GIVES DEER FEWER OPTIONS FOR CALORIES

Jeff Burleson

Deer and other wildlife demand rich nutrient sources throughout the year to fuel their daily requirements. For most of the Carolinas, Mother Nature provides adequate groceries in areas where wildlife populations are balanced.

There are some exceptions, particularly when unexpected winter weather blankets the landscape in December. Deer become slaves to their hunger and find food wherever it is available.

Deer in the Carolinas feast on seasonally available foods. Beginning in the spring, everything greens up, providing tender sprouts from grasses, forbs and small, woody vegetation. Additionally, the availability of spring soft mast will give deer and other wildlife plenty of reasons to get out of the bed early. Blueberries, blackberries and other soft mast become available in the spring.

Basically, deer have free reign on as much food as they need. They live the good life in the spring without any extreme cold or heat to contend with.

As summer arrives in June, the majority of the spring, soft-mast producers have

played out, but plenty of green, tender options are available to satisfy a hearty appetite. Everything is green, and deer find an endless supply of nature's bounty. They can thrive on fewer calories during the summer. They will bed down during the heat of the day and seek out food near water sources.

As the fall arrives in September, the taste of cool weather and the onset of breeding kick-starts hunger pangs, but it couldn't be at a better time because of the fall mast crop. Soft mast isn't just for the spring either. The countryside produces a wide variety of naturally occurring soft mast, including muscadine grapes, persimmons and plums. And fall is prime time for the oaks to release their bounty of carbohydrate-rich acorns.

Nature will provide foods for deer and other wildlife from spring through the fall. However, the Carolinas are still one of the largest agriculture producers in the nation, with millions of acres of corn, soybean, wheat, sweet potato and peanut crops that deer will travel miles to eat. Deer not only eat the seeds and root mast; they also feast on the foliage

of most of every commercial agriculture crop grown.

WINTER CHANGES

With a few exceptions, most crops are planted in the spring and harvested in the fall. The one thing that natural foods and planted agriculture have in common is the period of availability. The cafeteria is open from spring until late fall, but everything begins to dry up when winter arrives, right when deer and other wildlife may need it the most.

Of course, North Carolina and South Carolina don't exactly have the winter climates of Alaska or North Dakota, where average winter temperature lows are well below zero. In the Carolinas, when temperatures drop below freezing

continues on page 58



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



Jeff Burleson

PLANT IN DECEMBER?

For most food-plotters, fall plots are planted between August and October when soil temperatures are high and conducive for germination. This period brings the best potential for a rich, fall food source, but weather conditions in early December may offer hunters a last-minute option to keep food available for their deer.

In winter, deer seek rich, hearty foods. Typically, natural foods and agricultural crops are less available than any other time. A rich food source can be a premium place to hunt the last month of the Carolina deer season.

While most food-plot varieties require warm soils to germinate, many cereal grains thrive in colder climates. Wheat and rye are cold-hardy and do well when the mercury plummets. Wheat will germinate when soil temperatures are down to 39 degrees, and it contains 20-percent crude protein.

Rye will germinate when soil temperatures are as low as 34 degrees, and it will grow well at 38 degrees. Of all the winter grains, rye is the most cold-hardy and contains 15-percent crude protein.

So planting this month is a definite yes. Early December is a perfect time to plow up and plant a crop of winter wheat or rye. Additionally, rye and wheat will continue to grow throughout the winter, providing a healthy alternative to woody browse and their limited natural food selections. ■



2018-2019

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registration available at teamcto.org/northcarolina or on Facebook @ [ctonc](https://www.facebook.com/ctonc)

1-866-KID-HUNT

GREENER PASTURES

continue from page 57

for an extended period or when wintry precipitation covers the ground, wildlife seeks out high-energy foods.

The winter in the Carolinas usually doesn't arrive until after deer season is out. However, it wouldn't be unusual to get a cold spell laced with frozen precipitation this month. Unfortunately for deer, acorns are gone, and most agriculture fields are between rotations. That leaves deer to make a living on sparse hard mast and unsatisfying woody browse with little nutritional content.

Hunters who have invested time in a season-long food plot are in luck. Deer will flock to food plots during times of wintry weather, even if hunting pressure has run them off before. Fields of cereal grains such as oats, rye,

wheat and triticale are great December food-plot crops because they can still regenerate after heavy browsing. And a crop of brassicas will finally get some attention.

Often, plantings of rape, turnips and radishes will grow to epic proportions through the fall but get little use by wildlife until a hard freeze comes. The cold stimulates a chemical process that makes their foliage more palatable. But brassicas will not regenerate after heavy browsing, and deer can eradicate a plot quickly when December is freezing.

Food plots can bring wildlife in throughout the year. But when winter arrives, they can be the main event, just what the doctor ordered for that elusive buck. ■

NITROGEN IS KEY TO FOOD-PLOT SUCCESS

Nitrogen is one of the nature's most-important elements. It is a major component of chlorophyll, and chlorophyll is the principal compound that converts sunlight to usable energy.

With the exception of nitrogen-fixating legumes, all food plots need supplemental applications of nitrogen at several intervals, from planting to mid-way throughout the growth process.

Nitrogen can be applied in a gas, liquid or solid state. However, most applications are in liquid or solid states. Ammonium nitrate, calcium nitrate or urea are applied in liquid or granular forms. The nitrate or ammonium ions in these fertilizers are absorbed through the root systems and immediately utilized by the plant for producing energy and proteins. Nitrogen ions are a major component of amino acids, the building blocks of proteins.

Nitrogen is an important additive in most food-plot plants. However, it is relatively volatile and will only remain available for a short duration. Nitrogen unused by plants will soon leach out or get converted into the atmosphere shortly after application.

Typically, nitrogen is added along with other plant-nutrient concoctions, except for late applications on already growing crops. Nitrogen can be added mid-season to food plots to fuel rapid growth and to offset heavy browsing pressure in high deer-density areas. ■

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SMALL CRAFT ADVISORY

Phillip Gentry

Float-hunting a public creek or river is a great way to hunt ducks without ever seeing another hunter.



PADDLE UP SOME PUBLIC PUDDLE DUCKS

KAYAKS CAN PUT YOU IN POSITIONS FEW HUNTERS CAN REACH

One of the biggest problems with public duck hunting in the Carolinas is an overabundance of people who want to hunt and a limited amount of public water. Tales of getting to the best spots at 2 a.m. and sleeping in the boat until legal shooting light make the prospect of public duck hunting even less palatable.

The best way to gain access to huntable public land is to go where others can't. Talk to a few old-timers, and they will spin yarns of floating public waterways teeming with ducks, with no other duck hunters in sight, that will make your mouth water.

A lesson in public-domain law is in

order. The basic legal concept of riparian water rights states that all landowners whose properties adjoin a body of water have the right to make reasonable use of it as it flows through or over their properties. This includes the general public if a public right of way is included in that list of landowners. Who owns the soil beneath the water is another matter — usually between what is considered public property within the historical water boundary and ownership by adjacent property owners.

As confusing as this sounds, it's best to simply contact your local S.C. Department of Natural Resources or N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission office, explaining what and where you intend

to hunt, and see if they can provide some guidance.

Dumping a kayak into a flowing creek or river and fishing all day usually never gets anyone in a stir, but discharging firearms at waterfowl might, so planning your route — and knowing any residential property you might pass along the way — is an integral part of planning a float trip.



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

Phillip Gentry

DECEMBER'S BEST BETS

NORTH CAROLINA

WHAT — Wood ducks, teal, mergansers

WHERE — East-central North Carolina, East of I-95

HOW — Floating or drifting

LAUNCH — Hookerton or Snow Hill are the closest public ramps on Contentena Creek, but opportunities to dump in exist along stretches of Contentena Creek, plus the Neuse and Little rivers.

INSIDER TIP — Drift along close to the bank, watching the river margins ahead, and look closely behind downed trees for ducks to pop out at close range.

SOUTH CAROLINA

WHAT — Wood ducks, geese, mergansers and resident mallards

WHERE — Saluda River, Reedy River, Little River

HOW — Slowly paddle with the current and look for “ducky” looking spots to flush birds.

LAUNCH — Most places with public ramps will be too wide and slow to have much current. Google Earth will reveal the best dump-ins, usually at public right-of-ways.

INSIDER TIP — When slow waters like ponds and lakes freeze over, moving water will still be open, and ducks flock to those locations.

The next consideration is how to get from where you put in to where you take out. Hunting in two boats is doable, but it doubles your chances of spooking ducks out of range. Hunting in tandem is also doable, but it reduces your number of shots by half. The good thing is, if you someone is willing to drop you off, they don't have to do so before daylight, as mid-day is often the best time to float, after birds have fed and returned to the water to loaf and rest.

Once you've picked a stretch of water, consider 1 mile per hour the average duration of the trip.

You can paddle faster, but doing so will cause you to alert ducks before they get within shotgun range. Whether done on land or by water, the principals of stalking are the same. Reduce the amount of distance your quarry may spot you ahead of time by using shoreline cover to your advantage. Hug the bank and any inside curvature in the creek so you can “pop up” in range when rounding a bend.

Camouflage is essential, but only necessary from the front. It is common to float up on ducks that never bat an eye at a woody log moving naturally in the current until it starts shooting at them.

When birds flush at long range, don't risk a shot, because if you shoot at them, they probably won't come back. Instead, carry three or four decoys with you, toss them out and wait for 30 minutes to see if they return. If not, resume floating. ■

continues on page 62



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GETTING THAT FIRST LIMIT

The first time I attempted to float for ducks ruined me for hunting the traditional way for several years. It was a cold, wintry day at the tail end of a cold front that had frozen over every pond, slough and beaver swamp in three counties. At that time, I had the thought that I could simply paddle back upstream to my vehicle at the end of the hunt.

Three miles in, without seeing a duck, I gave up the idea of paddling back, but I was convinced I'd see an animal other than a deer, turkey and something that was probably a bobcat sooner or later. My luck changed as the landscape I passed through changed from mostly pine trees, poplars and maples to pin oaks and another bushy tree I never did identify.

The landscape also got flatter and had a number of smaller creeks and ditches that fed the creek. The first flock of wood ducks to blow up in my face got shot at, but not hit. The second flock lost a member and the third another. Under the old South Carolina limit of two wood

ducks per day, I figured my hunt was over and started thinking about how I was going to get home.

Five minutes later, I noticed several iridescent green heads duck behind a blow-down tree 60 yards away. I'd never held so still in my life as the slow river pushed me toward that tree. I was expecting a pair, maybe three birds to flush, but at least 20 suddenly jumped when the boat evened with the tip of the tree. A brace of mallards met their demise on the first and third shots.

After collecting those birds, I backed the craft into the lee of the blowdown and waited. Cussing myself for not bringing any decoys or even a call, a group of three mallards winged in and landed in front of the boat. Two shots were fired and a limit was finished.

I eventually made it home, but not before dark and not before walking nearly 3 miles to a gas station after ditching the boat, gun and birds under a bridge until my ride came. ■



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HUNTING SEASONS

DEER

Region	Method	Season Dates
Western	Bowhunting	Sept. 8-30 Oct. 14-Nov. 18 Dec. 9-Jan. 1, 2019 (bucks only)
	Muzzleloader	Oct. 1-13
	Gun	Nov. 19-Dec. 8
Northwestern	Bowhunting	Sept. 9-Nov. 2
	Muzzleloader	Nov. 3-16
Central	Gun	Nov. 19-Jan. 1, 2019
	Bowhunting	Sept. 8-Oct. 26
	Muzzleloader	Oct. 27-Nov. 9
Northeastern/ Southeastern	Gun	Nov. 10-Jan. 1, 2019
	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.
Statewide: Sept. 1-30 NE Zone, Jan. 11-26, permit only

SNOW, BLUE, ROSS GEESE

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

DUCKS

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

EARLY TEAL

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

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/	Sept. 15-March 15, 2019 (statewide)	3 raccoons per party	
Opossum	Sept. 15-March 15, 2019 (Game Zones 3, 6)	No limits	
Other	Nov. 26-March 1, 2019	No limits	
furbearers	(bobcat, otter, weasel, mink, muskrat, skunk)		
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	 1 (permit only)
Rails	Oct. 6-10		
King & Clapper	Nov. 3-Jan. 6, 2018	15	45
Sora & Virginia		25	75
Gallinules	Nov. 3-Jan. 6, 2018 (common/purple)	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

COOKING ON THE WILD SIDE

Jerry Dilsaver

BASIC VENISON SUMMER SAUSAGE

THIS DISH WILL BE A HIT AT HOLIDAY GATHERINGS

Fall is a special time for sportsmen in the Carolinas, and it has managed to shine through all the weather we've had this year, including two hurricanes. Fish are biting, and most hunting seasons are open. There were repairs this year that had to be placed in front of the honey-do list, but occasionally sportsmen need a break — even in the worst of times — and the fish and game cooperated.

Deer hunting is a favorite pursuit in both Carolinas. Some hunters spend a lot of time trying to outwit that dominant buck that has escaped them for years, but the major goals for many are quality time outdoors and fresh, delicious venison for the dinner table. Venison is a treat that fits my granddaddy's favorite dinnertime saying: "It's not just good, it's good for you, too!"

Granddad had a lot right with that simple saying. Venison is lower in fat and doesn't have any of the drugs, steroids and hormones fed and injected into most farm-raised animals.

The holidays are approaching, and regular readers know I like to offer a special game or fish recipe to help celebrate the Christmas season; this year it's a venison summer sausage. Some

folks like to call this a beef (venison) stick, and that's okay.

You should absolutely make some for your family, and it's a real treat to share it with your hunting and fishing buddies. I believe that including game and fish recipes in Christmas party treats is an excellent way of celebrating the game and introducing new people to it. Whatever you do, don't hide that the dish is made with game and then surprise someone after the fact. Even if they like it, that is a negative.

Many folks are invited to gatherings during this time, and this is a great treat for them — only if you make sure the folks there know it is venison, not beef. People have a variety of reasons for not eating venison, and we should respect them. It can also be embarrassing when the non-hunter at the party begins raving about how good your beef stick is and someone points out it's really venison.

This dish is good for other occasions, too. I've noticed it tends to disappear quickly served with cheese and crackers when friends tailgate or gather to watch sports on TV. ■



Simple venison summer sausage can be made spicier or milder by adding or limiting items like pepper, liquid smoke or other "tang" items

INSET: A spicy mustard, cheese and crackers are perfect additions to warm summer sausage.

BASIC VENISON SUMMER SAUSAGE

I call this basic because that is exactly what it is. This is a summer sausage you can serve to anyone, well, anyone who enjoys eating venison. Unlike most sausages, there isn't a casing; the outside crusts and holds it together. There is a little salt taste and a little garlic taste and a hint of smoke and pepper, but that's all. It is extremely mild and shouldn't be too strong or spicy for anyone. Because there isn't a primary spice or ingredient flavor, it pairs well with spicy mustard for those who enjoy a little more bite.

This recipe is extremely simple. It takes a little time, because there is mixing and curing, cooking and cooling, but there aren't many ingredients or steps. One warning is to be careful with the liquid smoke. I'm all for experimenting and adjusting recipes to personal tastes, but a little liquid smoke goes a long way.

The most difficulty I have with this recipe is finding the Morton's Tender Quick Curing Salt. Most specialty shops and some larger and specialty grocery stores have it. It can be ordered online. You only use a little, and it freezes well, so you won't have to purchase it often.

This recipe is also very versatile. You can add more salt, more pepper or red pepper, more garlic salt, more liquid smoke, plus, you can add ingredients that aren't on my the list. I make a batch every year and get three rolls for a Christmas party, Christmas Eve snacks with the family and have one in reserve for something unexpected. If nothing else comes up, it makes a great tailgate snack for a college football game.

I also make several batches for myself and my friends who enjoy spicier foods. One of the simplest things to do is to add more or red pepper. I sometimes also add ground chipotle or jalapeno

peppers. Chopped peppers and cheese work well. Jalapeno and cheddar is a favorite of several of my hunting and fishing buddies.

I'm sorry, but I can't remember who first shared this recipe with me, I but none of the friends I've asked can recall, either. I guess we're just getting old and forgetful.

I have to thank to my wife, Donna Mooneyham, who came up with the idea to use a sushi mat covered with parchment paper to form the rolls. My rolls had been lumpy for years, but it must not have affected the taste, as no one complained. Now, many folks ask how I get them so round. One friend insisted I was packing them in paper towel tubes and then peeling the cardboard off. That's a novel idea, but I find the sushi mat works very well.

I don't have a smoker, but I've often wondered how this would taste cooked in a smoker. I cook it for 3½ to 4 hours at 225, and that's a perfect temperature for a smoker. Maybe someone will try it and let me know, or offer their smoker to cook a batch?

Whether you choose to make this summer sausage basic or add other ingredients, I believe you'll like it. It's also as simple to make as it is good to eat.

Enjoy. ■

INGREDIENTS:

2 pounds ground venison
3 tbsp Morton's Tender Quick Curing Salt
½ tsp garlic salt
1 tsp coarse ground black pepper
1 tbsp liquid smoke.
Options: extra pepper, extra garlic salt, extra liquid smoke, red pepper, ground chipotle or jalapeno peppers, chopped jalapeno peppers, grated cheese and more.



A sushi mat covered in parchment paper is the perfect surface for rolling summer sausage logs.

Jerry Dilsaver

PREPARATION:

Using a large bowl, thoroughly mix the Morton's Tender Quick Curing Salt into the ground venison. Cover or seal the bowl and refrigerate for a day. Mix in the black pepper, garlic salt, liquid smoke and any optional ingredients. Reseal the bowl and refrigerate several hours or overnight.

Use a sushi mat covered with parchment paper to roll the venison into 3 equal-size rolls. Preheat oven to 225 degrees. Place venison rolls on a broiler pan (or rack) so

grease can drain as they cook. Cook for 3½ to 4 hours. Allow rolls to cool and then refrigerate (or freeze for later use). Serve cool to room temperature with crackers, cheese and spicy mustard.

This is a great hors d'oeuvre or snack. It is versatile and can be made mild or spiced up by adding more or different ingredients. It is excellent for family gatherings, parties, tailgating or watching sports in a hunting/fishing lodge, man cave or the

den. Spicy mustard is a must condiment to accompany this, and there may be other personal favorites. My wife prefers it with the lighter taste of Sociables crackers, and I like a variety of whole wheat crackers. ■



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 at captainjerry@captainjerry.com.

STICKS AND STRINGS

Sammy Romano

DON'T LET WHEEL LEAN HURT YOUR SHOOTING

MECHANICAL OR SHOOTER-INDUCED, IT CAN AFFECT YOUR ACCURACY, CAUSE DAMAGE TO YOUR EQUIPMENT

The advent of the compound bow changed archery for the better. The addition of wheels allows more people to participate in our sport by making it easier to draw and hold heavier draw weights.

Higher let-off at the back end of the draw cycle makes it easier to aim and hold on target longer. Wheels also provide a lot more arrow speed than traditional bows are capable of at the same draw weight.

It is ironic that the very thing that gives compound bows all of their advantages can also rob you of perfect arrow flight and accuracy. With the addition of wheels, cams or pulleys to a bow comes the additional costs of wheel timing and wheel lean.

Many archers are now familiar with wheel-timing issues. If your bow's wheels are not synchronized perfectly, they fire out of sync, causing the arrow to whip at

release and fly horribly. Not many people are familiar with wheel lean, however. This can be as big or an even bigger problem, as wheel lean not only drastically effects arrow flight, but it can also cause excessive wear to many parts of your bow.

There are two types of wheel lean: mechanical and shooter-induced. Inherent wheel lean is caused by one or more of several mechanical issues that can occur. Shooter-induced wheel lean is caused by improper sight alignment and/or improper shooting form. Either way, accuracy is drastically effected, and not for the better.


STRING-STRETCHING

In cases of mechanical wheel lean, severe damage to both the string set and bearings (both wheel and cable roller) can occur. In the case of shooter-induced wheel lean, the arrow impacts the target

horizontally out of line with the bull's-eye. The groupings of arrows will drift progressively in the direction of lean of the bow's top wheel, becoming more severe as distance increases.

A common cause of mechanical wheel lean is unaddressed string and cable stretch. All modern compound bows use either a cable rod with a slide or rollers to pull the cables out of line and provide clearance for the arrow's fletching as it passes them. This creates uneven pressure on the limb tips, which causes severe wheel lean.

In order to correct this, one side of the yoke or harness is often twisted more than the other to compensate. As the bow is shot repeatedly, this stretches, along with the rest of the string set, allowing the cam or wheel to lean again. This is corrected by adding additional twists as necessary to bring the wheel back in line. Sometimes, the limb itself



Check wheel alignment with an arrow shaft (left). A bow press is necessary to determine whether you have mechanical wheel lean and to effect correction.

becomes warped, and the yoke is not able to be twisted enough to level the wheel. This requires a new limb to fix the issue.

On split-limb bows, the four limbs have to be synchronized to the same strength or deflection. A good analogy is that of fishing rod actions. If the left limb is medium-fast action, and the right limb is medium-heavy action, the left limb will bend more than the right limb, causing the wheel on that end of the bow to lean.

MAKE IT RIGHT

There are several ways to correct this, depending on the cam system. They include twisting the yoke, swapping limb position and changing wheel spacing to affect wheel alignment. Twisting the yoke works the same as with a solid-limb bow. In rare cases, swapping limb position will help, but the best system is a top-hat limb bushing system such as that used by Mathews on the Halon, Triax and several other models. By changing the top-hat bushings, wheel lean is easily and perfectly corrected.

In instances of severe mechanical wheel lean, it is not hard to diagnose, but in many cases, a well-trained eye is required. In nearly every case, a bow press is required to correct the problem. For these reasons, it is best to have your bow examined by a professional. Further complicating diagnosis, in some of the newer models, it is necessary to have some pre-shot wheel lean in order for the cams or wheels to be straight in-line at full draw.

On most single cam models, the idle wheel (top wheel) must be aligned straight when the bow is at rest. This is easily checked by placing a straight edge — an arrow shaft works best — on the shelf (outboard) side of the wheel. The gap between the arrow's shaft and the bow's string should be even for the entire length of the arrow. Dual cam and cam-a-half systems are harder to judge.

SIGHT, FORM PROBLEMS

Shooter-induced wheel lean is often caused by improper leveling of the bow

sight's second and third axis adjustments. Many archers are not even aware of these features, but if improperly adjusted, they will cause the shooter to lean the bow at full draw. Also, poor shooting form can cause this problem. Have your bow sight's second and third axis checked by a pro-shop to prevent this issue. If your issue is form, working with an instructor for an hour or two should correct this issue.

Although wheel lean causes many issues for the archer, it can be corrected fairly easily. A quick trip to your local pro shop can diagnose and fix this issue, often without breaking the bank. Don't let wheel lean rob your accuracy and cost you a buck this season. ■



Sammy Romano is a lifelong hunter who has worked in the archery industry for more than 24 years. His expertise includes compounds and crossbows. He can be reached at samboka31@aol.com.

A large advertisement for SeaArk boats. The top half shows a man in camouflage gear sitting in a black SeaArk boat on a swampy area with tall reeds. The boat has a Suzuki outboard motor and the text 'SEAARK' and 'DXS 1548-SLD' on its side. The text 'SWAMP TESTED. HUNTER APPROVED.' is overlaid in large, bold, yellow-green letters. The bottom half features the SeaArk logo, which consists of three stylized fish swimming to the right, followed by the word 'SEAARK' in a large, bold, black font and 'BOATS' in a smaller font below it. Below the logo, the text 'Find your dream duck boat at www.searkboats.com' and the hashtags '#yourstoryyourboat #boatsbuiltforalifetime' are displayed.


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DECEMBER: IT'S ALL ABOUT BAIT

GAMEFISH WILL CONCENTRATE EVEN MORE THAN USUAL ON FORAGE AS THANKSGIVING PASSES



Guide Bob Winters will target Santee Cooper blue catfish with drift rigs in December, while fishing live-bait rigs for striped bait at the same time.

Terry Madewell

As water temperatures dip in December, with frequent cold fronts blasting through South Carolina, the fishing on the Santee Cooper lakes, Marion and Moultrie, seem to defy logic and actually improves instead of slowing.

It's not just one or two high-profile species providing the action, most of the top-targeted species at the Santee Cooper lakes are at a very high level of activity. And as usual, with good fishing anywhere, a lot of that is forage-driven.

Kevin Davis, owner of Blacks Camp on the Diversion Canal and an active guide, said both lakes are highly productive throughout December, and the availability of forage is one reason.

"By December, this year's crop of shad has grown to a desirable size for many species of gamefish," he said. "As water temperature cools, both the threadfin and gizzard shad begin to bunch up in large schools, making it easier for predators to utilize as a primary food source."

Davis (843-312-3080) said that December is an outstanding month for striped bass, with excellent topwater schooling action, and also, live-bait fishing. December ranks as one of the top months for catfish, with quantity and quality catches commonplace

"Largemouth bass fishing is typically excellent, with some schooling action often occurring early in the month, but solid patterns hold throughout the

month, and they're forage related," he said. "By January, the fast-paced bass action begins to slow a bit, but then we're getting close to big-bass season again once we get into 2019, so that's a fair trade-off."

"Crappie fishing is an often-overlooked December highlight, and limit catches of slabs in deep water are reasonable expectations. And early in the December, it's still possible to catch limits of huge bream off the deep brush, too, so double-dipping of crappie and bream is a fun fishing trip."

Davis said one huge game changer for December is the arrival of menhaden, primarily into Lake Moultrie, but they'll flood into both lakes. When this occurs,

menhaden are forage No. 1, but since they are typically found in the open waters of Lake Moultrie, stripers and catfish are the primary species making the best use of the short-term resource.

Brett Mitchell, a bass pro who guides on the Santee Cooper lakes, said December can produce outstanding results.

SHAD=BASS

“The winter patter is a favorite of mine, in part because it’s gets easy to predict because of their affinity for shad,” said Mitchell, who points to both big numbers and big fish being in play. The key to success, he said, is having the patience to work through the slow periods while searching for the localized hotspots.

“Typical of winter fishing, bass are usually grouped together near shad, and when you find one good bass, more are usually nearby,” he said.

Mitchell focuses on areas where shad are abundant, but points, pockets and slightly deeper shorelines are typical targets. He usually works water less than 12 feet deep, often in the 5- to 7-foot depth ranges. His favors crankbaits in December; he typically prefers shad colors to mimic what bass are eating.

Bob Winters, who guides for stripers and catfish, said December is a favored month on both lakes when targeting shad schools. But when the menhaden flood into Lake Moultrie, fishing for both species can be outstanding.

“Some days, we’ll target stripers, others we’ll work primarily on catfish, and it’s often dependant on weather conditions,” he said. “But when the shad school up tight and menhaden are in Lake Moultrie, one common technique is to pull catfish rigs by drifting, but also have down rods with live bait for stripers. It’s a great way to double up on these two species at the same time.”

Winters (843-709-0626) said to watch your electronics to learn the precise depth stripers are holding and keep your baits set at or slightly above the depth they’re marked. For catfish, he fishes blueback herring, perch or menhaden on the bottom with a Santee drift rig: a Carolina rig with a small float on the leader between the hook and swivel.

Crappie are caught exceptionally well in both lakes by fishing live bait or small jigs over deep brush in open water. Brush or natural cover found along drops, humps and deeper holes are all prime crappie fishing targets.

One major catfishing tournament is held in December: the Blacks Camp Big Cat Shootout, set for Dec. 7-8.

“The tournament is 100-percent payback and is an opportunity for catfishermen to fish for substantial prize money,” Davis said. “We’re expecting even more boats this year than in 2017, but the winner last year, who also caught the big fish, won over \$7,500.” ■



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.



Terry Madewell

MENHADEN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Menhaden migrate into the Santee Cooper lakes, particularly Lake Moultrie, in December, changing the way that striped bass and catfish act. The aggressive gamefish target menhaden whenever and wherever they can be found, and anglers need to make the same adjustment.



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Photo: Cajun Guide Service

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HEAD FOR THE MOUNTAINS

Robert Satterwhite

Bigger streams like South Carolina's Eastatoee River, a delayed-harvest stream, tend to fish better in the winter than smaller, more remote waters.

KEYS TO CATCHING MORE WINTER TROUT

SLOW DOWN, PUT AWAY THOSE DRY FLIES AND HEAD FOR THE BIGGEST STREAM IN YOUR NECK OF THE WOODS

The key to successful winter trout fishing is to use more nymphs and fewer dry flies. With fewer hatches coming off, nymphs will be the most-productive flies until spring. The numbers of fish you catch may not be as big, but you'll likely catch some big trout.

Whatever the weather brings, one thing is certain: trout streams will be waiting, and the fishing will be good as always — depending on your definition of good. Trout must eat regardless of the weather, and true trout fishers must fish regardless of the weather.

TECHNIQUE

Fishing techniques should adapt to the weather and the fish. Trout are less likely to move when the water temperature is 40 degrees or lower, so feeding lanes will be much narrower. The amount of time fishing one spot should be doubled, even tripled. Fish an area thoroughly, move a few feet and continue casting, using the

roll cast when appropriate.

Nymph fishing requires a slow presentation that concentrates on slower water in the deeper sections of a pool or run. To increase your chances of getting a strike, use a dry fly such as a Royal Wulff as a strike indicator and tip your nymph dropper with lead or use a bead-head nymph. When using lead, crimp the lead close to the fly. The nymph should be small enough that it doesn't drag the dry fly down. For Nos. 16 to 14 nymphs, for example, use a No. 12 or larger dry fly as the indicator, attaching the line to the shank of the nymph so that the dropper dangles about a foot below the top fly — depending on water level.

Work upstream and let the nymph dead-drift to the bottom of a pool or run, stripping it in short spurts. If you see a trout following the fly but not taking it, freeze — and give the line a short jerk. That will make the trout think the nymph is trying to escape, and it will usually strike.

Strikes often will be subtle, sometimes little more than a slight hesitation of the line.

FLIES

Use a variety of sizes. If a large nymph such as a No. 10, No. 8 or a No. 6, doesn't work, switch to a No. 20 or No. 18. Cast large nymphs such as Woolly Buggers across the current. When the line straightens, lower the rod tip, and work the nymph through the water in short strips, keeping the rod tip down so that the nymph stays deep. Often, a trout won't hit on the first couple of casts, so continue casting. Keep your presentation slow to give the trout more time to study the fly. Sometimes you must put the fly in the trout's face to get a hit.

In the winter, dark colors — browns, blacks and olives — work better than bright colors. Suggested patterns are Nos. 24-20 Zebra Midge, Nos. 16-14 Griffith's Gnat and Nos. 14-12 black Winter Stone. Large sculpin patterns

in Nos. 8-4 are very effective in big-water streams as are large black, brown or olive Woolly Buggers.

Not all winter fishing is limited to nymphs. Warm, sunny, winter days can produce small but productive hatches of midges and, periodically, Blue-Winged Olives, which can be found on mountain streams almost any time of the year.

CONDITIONS

Winter fishing often can be frustrating because trout will suddenly turn off, and nothing you throw to them will get a strike.

Weather, more than anything else, dictates the quality of fishing, and the time of day when you're fishing is often more important than the pattern you use. Once the sun dips below the treetops, water temperatures drop quickly, and trout hunker in to wait out the cold.

STREAMS

Larger streams, such as the Oconaluftee River on the Cherokee Indian Reservation and the larger delayed-harvest streams such as the Nantahala and Tuckasegee, rivers in North Carolina and the Chattooga River and Eastatoee rivers in South Carolina offer excellent fishing in the winter. The Oconaluftee is stocked weekly during the winter. South Carolina's delayed-harvest season runs from Nov. 1 through May 14. The delayed-harvest season in North Carolina is Oct. 1 through May 31.

All delayed-harvest waters in the mountain region were heavily stocked during the fall, so fishing should be excellent throughout the winter. ■



BIGGER, NOT MORE:

Fishermen aren't likely to hook into as many trout during the winter, but fishing slowly, covering water thoroughly, and using the right nymphs, might get you a hookup with an extra-big brown trout like this one.

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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 Tuckasegee River, Caney Fork, Moses Creek, and several other prime trout streams.

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Chuck Stewart

Chuck Stewart of Stem, N.C., caught this awfully nice bream in a farm pond.



Bryan Buckner

Bryan Buckner from Saluda, N.C., caught this 4-pound smallmouth bass last September in South Carolina's Lake Jocassee.



Zack Satterfield

Zack Satterfield of Reidsville, N.C., killed this wide, Rockingham County 8-pointer on Nov. 24, 2017.



Bryce Evans

Bryce Evans, 13, took his first buck last Nov. 25 in Franklin County, N.C.



Bo Basulto

Armand "Bo" Basulto of Waynesville, N.C., caught this 6-pound striper at Lake Hartwell on June 18, 2018.



Tasha Carlson

Tasha Carlson caught this 35-pound flathead catfish in North Carolina's Lake Norman this past March.



Maddie Queen

Maddie Queen, 11, killed this nice gobbler on South Carolina's Youth Day last spring.

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But hang on to the negatives, because the photos cannot be returned.



Kallie Pruitt

Kallie Pruitt, 8, killed her first deer, this doe, in Northampton County, N.C., on Nov. 24, 2017.



Ronnie Johnson

Ronnie Johnson of Raleigh, N.C., caught this striper near Swan Quarter, N.C. on Feb. 20, 2018.



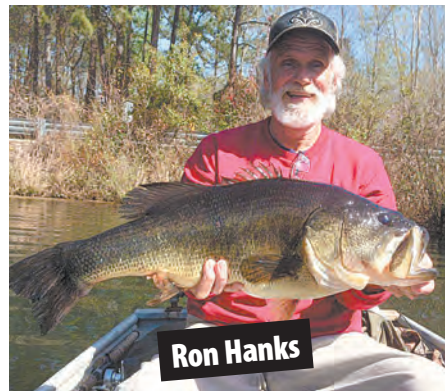
Tommy Bennett

Tommy Bennett caught this nice striper on Feb. 24, 2018, on North Carolina's Badin Lake.



Teresa McCullough

Teresa McCullough and Ronnie Spivey caught these crappie from a private pond in Nash County, N.C., on Nov. 18, 2017.



Ron Hanks

Ron Hanks of Columbia, S.C., caught this 11.2-pound pond bass near Gaston, S.C., on April 1, 2018.



Brian, Jackson Sternthal

Jackson Sternthal, 6, caught this channel cat in the Cape Fear River near Elizabethton, N.C., fishing with dad Brian.



Gabriel Johnson

Gabriel Johnson, 6, of Simpsonville, S.C., killed his first buck, this 8-point, 190-pound trophy, on Oct. 1, 2017.



Mason Chapman

Mason Chapman, 5, of Lexington, N.C., killed his first deer on Nov. 12, 2017, in Davidson County.



Max Andrews

Max Andrews, 12, from Snow Hill, N.C., shows off his first 8-point buck, taken last season.



Joe Cataldo

Joe Cataldo killed this big-bodied 8-point buck in Rowan County, N.C., on Dec. 1, 2017.



Brian Carden

Brian Carden of Durham, N.C., caught this 8-pound bass in a farm pond in Durham County.

GOT PHOTOS? WE WANT 'EM

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Ty Little



Wyatt Little

Ty Little, 13, and Wyatt Little, 9, caught their biggest bass on April 6, 2018, at W. Kerr Scott Reservoir near Wilkesboro. N.C.



Alex Pittman

Alex Pittman of Dillon, S.C., caught this nice redbreast sunfish in the Little Pee Dee River.



Rick Goforth

Rick Goforth caught these nice crappie at High Rock Lake last spring within a few minutes of each other.



Leighanna Ward

Leighanna Ward killed this 8-point in Randolph County, N.C., on Oct. 28, 2017, with a muzzleloader.



Kevin Bradley Taylor

Kevin Bradley Taylor Jr., 6, killed his first turkey on opening day of 2016 youth season in Bertie County, N.C.

ASTRO TABLES

Astro Tables is far more effective than "moon tables," because it takes into account critical solar energies as well as lunar.

The "Best Days" column is based on the ever-changing positions of the sun and the moon, rating each day on a scale of 0 to 100. The higher the number, the more solar/lunar influence that day is experiencing (see "Value" column or corresponding black bars).

The two Primary periods (Moon Overhead and Moon Underfoot) vary in length from one hour to three-and-one-half hours, depending on a number of important lunar cycles, such as how close the moon is to the earth that day and how high its orbit is. The solar symbols alert you to when a Primary period overlaps a major solar period (eg: Dawn, High-Noon, and Dusk). The secondary periods of Moonrise and Moonset last about one hour each... 30 minutes before and after the listed time. (See key at bottom of each month for more detail.)

Astro Tables is a quick-reference version of its parent publication, the **PrimeTimes Wall Calendar**, which is recommended for those wishing more complete data on the best days and times to go fishing and hunting for the entire year (see "Available Products" below).

PrimeTimes forecasts are based on solar/lunar research at a leading college of astrophysics and our own research pond/wildlife area. Annual data is supplied by the U.S. Naval Observatory. All times are adjusted to the center of your time zone and for Daylight Saving Time.

AVAILABLE PRODUCTS:

The 2019 PrimeTimes Wall Calendar. \$13.95 (plus \$4 s&h). Know the best days, best times, and their relative strengths for all of 2019 with this information-packed, full-color, 11-inch by 17-inch, graphic peaks

and-valleys forecaster. Includes rise and set times for the sun and moon, space to log your catches, "Timely Tips," plus fish and game symbols showing you each month's don't-miss periods. Also includes exclusive summary charts revealing the best and worst days of 2019, the year's best periods, a look ahead at 2020, and more. Comes with FREE 2019 Astro Tables pocket calendar, which sells separately for \$8.95, plus \$3 s&h.

Book: "How to Know When to Go" by Rick Taylor. \$14.95 (plus \$4 s&h). 100 pages, 43 illustrations. A comprehensive look at the main factors influencing fish and game activity periods, plus how to devise an effective when-to-go game plan using any year's PrimeTimes calendars. Individual assessments of bass, panfish, deer, turkey, and more.

2019 Ultimate PrimeTimes software for PCs. \$29.95 (plus \$3 s&h, or no s&h if downloaded from web). The world's best forecaster allows you to fine-tune the peak times to your exact location, quarry, and even weather. Too many features to list here, including making your own App. For more details, please call us or visit our web site (see below).

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2018 DEC	BEST DAYS				VALUE
	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	EXCL	
Sat 1	█	█	█	█	30
Sun 2	█	█	█	█	26
Mon 3	█	█	█	█	22
Tue 4	█	█	█	█	28
Wed 5	█	█	█	█	35
Thu 6	█	█	█	█	42
Fri 7	█	█	█	█	45
Sat 8	█	█	█	█	34
Sun 9	█	█	█	█	22
Mon 10	█	█	█	█	13
Tue 11	█	█	█	█	8
Wed 12	█	█	█	█	10
Thu 13	█	█	█	█	13
Fri 14	█	█	█	█	21
Sat 15	█	█	█	█	34
Sun 16	█	█	█	█	28
Mon 17	█	█	█	█	26
Tue 18	█	█	█	█	29
Wed 19	█	█	█	█	43
Thu 20	█	█	█	█	56
Fri 21	█	█	█	█	68
Sat 22	█	█	█	█	74
Sun 23	█	█	█	█	66
Mon 24	█	█	█	█	56
Tue 25	█	█	█	█	44
Wed 26	█	█	█	█	37
Thu 27	█	█	█	█	33
Fri 28	█	█	█	█	34
Sat 29	█	█	█	█	42
Sun 30	█	█	█	█	28
Mon 31	█	█	█	█	20

25 50 75
AVERAGE

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LUNAR PERIODS					
TIMES OCCURRING AT NIGHT ARE SHADED					
MOON RISE	PRIMARY MOON OVERHEAD	MOON SET	PRIMARY MOON UNDERFOOT		
1:07 am	6:20 am - 8:50 am ☀	1:56 pm	6:45 pm - 9:15 pm	☾	
2:11 am	7:20 am - 9:28 am	2:29 pm	7:45 pm - 9:53 pm	☾	
3:13 am	8:15 am - 10:07 am	3:03 pm	8:40 pm - 10:32 pm	☾	
4:15 am	9:10 am - 10:48 am	3:37 pm	9:35 pm - 11:13 pm	☾	
5:17 am	10:05 am - 11:31 am	4:14 pm	10:30 pm - 11:56 pm	☾	
6:17 am	11:01 am - 12:13 pm ☀	4:54 pm	11:26 pm - Midnight	☾	
7:15 am	11:55 am - 1:01 pm ☀	5:37 pm	Midnight - 12:38 am	☾	NEW
8:11 am	12:47 pm - 1:49 pm	6:24 pm	12:20 am - 1:26 am	☾	
9:03 am	1:39 pm - 2:37 pm	7:14 pm	1:12 am - 2:14 am	☾	LOW
9:49 am	2:26 pm - 3:28 pm	8:07 pm	2:04 am - 3:02 am	☾	
10:32 am	3:11 pm - 4:19 pm	9:01 pm	2:51 am - 3:53 am	☾	
11:09 am	3:51 pm - 5:09 pm ☀	9:56 pm	3:36 am - 4:44 am	☾	Apogee
11:44 am	4:31 pm - 5:59 pm ☀	10:51 pm	4:16 am - 5:34 am	☾	
12:16 pm	5:07 pm - 6:49 pm	11:46 pm	4:56 am - 6:24 am	☾	
12:46 pm	5:42 pm - 7:40 pm		5:32 am - 7:14 am	☾	HALF
1:16 pm	6:16 pm - 8:32 pm	12:42 am	6:07 am - 8:05 am ☀	☾	
1:47 pm	6:54 pm - 9:24 pm	1:39 am	6:41 am - 8:57 am ☀	☾	
2:20 pm	7:34 pm - 10:20 pm	2:39 am	7:19 am - 9:49 am	☾	
2:56 pm	8:16 pm - 11:18 pm	3:41 am	7:59 am - 10:45 am	☾	
3:38 pm	9:06 pm - 12:18 am	4:46 am	8:41 am - 11:43 am	☾	
4:26 pm	10:00 pm - 1:22 am	5:53 am	9:31 am - 12:43 pm	☾	Winter
5:22 pm	11:00 pm - Midnight	7:00 am	10:25 am - 1:47 pm ☀	☾	FULL
6:24 pm	Midnight - 2:26 am	8:04 am	11:25 am - 2:51 pm	☾	HIGH
7:32 pm	12:04 am - 3:26 am	9:04 am	12:29 pm - 3:51 pm	☾	Perigee
8:42 pm	1:09 am - 4:25 am	9:56 am	1:34 pm - 4:50 pm	☾	
9:51 pm	2:13 am - 5:19 am	10:42 am	2:38 pm - 5:44 pm	☾	
10:59 pm	3:16 am - 6:06 am	11:22 am	3:41 pm - 6:31 pm ☀	☾	
	4:17 am - 6:49 am	11:58 am	4:42 pm - 7:14 pm	☾	
12:04 am	5:14 am - 7:30 am	12:33 pm	5:39 pm - 7:55 pm	☾	HALF
1:07 am	6:11 am - 8:09 am	1:06 pm	6:36 pm - 8:34 pm	☾	
2:09 am	7:06 am - 8:48 am	1:39 pm	7:31 pm - 9:13 pm	☾	

ANY LUNAR PERIOD IS ENHANCED WHEN IT OVERLAPS A KEY SOLAR PERIOD. THE BEST OF THESE OVERLAPS ARE DESIGNATED BY THE SUN SYMBOLS:
☀ = DAWN ☀ = HIGH NOON ☀ = DUSK

WHILE THE LESSER MOONRISE AND -SET OVERLAPS (ABOUT 30 MIN. BEFORE AND AFTER THE LISTED TIME) ARE DESIGNATED BY BOLD BLACK TYPE.

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Guide Joel Richardson doubled up on these Buggs Island fish: striped bass and largemouth bass.

WINTER DRAWDOWN KEYS KERR'S BASS

Lower water level sends bass into feeding mode in December

Guide Joel Richardson of Kernersville, N.C., said bass fishing at Kerr Lake, aka Buggs Island, is "as good as it gets" come December.

"During December, the lake typically experiences a drawdown of 3 feet or more; that triggers the action," Richardson said. "Fishermen can catch bass both shallow and deep."

Richardson said some local anglers fish

vertically with jiggging spoons, bouncing their baits on deep structure in 20 to 25 feet of water. They're adept with their electronics, locating concentrations of fish over high spots, main-lake points, ledges and channel drops.

If the weather is mild and the water temperature remains in the mid-50s, bass can be caught with topwaters wherever baitfish can be seen breaking the surface.

Richardson said fish can also be caught in the backs of creeks, following bait. They can be caught along steep banks, rocks and stumps in 6 feet of water or less.

Richardson (www.joelgrichardson.com) uses buzzbaits, spinnerbaits, lipless crankbaits and medium-running crankbaits to entice strikes from these shallow bass. For hard baits, he selects shad patterns to mimic the forage in the lake.

If it's cold and the bite slows, he fishes a 3/8-ounce jig'n' chunk in black/blue or black/brown.

"Rock is the best bet," said Richardson.

If he's fortunate, he'll stumble upon a bass bonanza in one of the lake's many pockets.

"Occasionally, baitfish gather in huge numbers in a small pocket," he said. "They're packed so tight it's as if you couldn't squeeze any more in there.

They'll be plenty of largemouth bass mixed in with some stripers in that pocket, and the fish keep returning to the place until the baitfish leave."

Richardson said finding these pockets is a hit-or-miss proposition.

"You could motor about all week and never find one," said Richardson. "Buggs covers 50,000 acres, so you need to be lucky to find a pocket loaded with baitfish."

Richardson said fishermen shouldn't be deterred by the cold.

"I've had some of my best days at Buggs in the snow," he said. "The main concern is dealing with slippery or frozen ramps."

Richardson said another plus is that in December, there's little fishing pressure.

"You'll just about have the lake all to yourself," said Richardson, who won't fish Buggs in December if the lake is flooded.

"With the typical winter draw-down, it's rare to encounter high water conditions this time of year," said Richardson. "But with all the storms and hurricanes we've had this fall, there's no telling.

"When Buggs is flooded, winter bass don't relate to the flooded trees and bushes for some reason. They move deep and become almost impossible to catch." ■

— Tony Garitta

The ICW around Little River, S.C., fills up with stripers as the water cools.



Jeff Burleson

North Carolina and South Carolina offer tremendous habitat along their coastlines for a myriad of saltwater species. As the weather cools and heads into winter, most baitfish and predators evacuate inshore areas and seek refuge in deeper water or places with relatively warmer water, such as the section of the Intracoastal Waterway between North Myrtle Beach and the North Carolina state line.

This section of ICW is known to hold baitfish in winter and redfish, speckled trout and striped bass — the inshore trifecta. Anglers able to tough out winter conditions can expect any one of these three species on each cast.

Tom Cushman of Captain Cush's Calmwater Charters fishes those waters every chance he can get in December and January because the fishing can be off the chain.

"The ICW holds a substantial amount of bait this time of year, and we will rarely leave the main channel," said Cushman (843-997-5850). "We cast a lot of soft plastics, and when you get a bite, it could be a trout, red, or a striped bass."

For most of the estuaries on both sides of the state line will typically hold speckled trout

and redfish; striped bass is not a fish many anglers are accustomed to seeing.

Since baitfish congregate in the Little River section of the ICW, stripers are right at home, but competing with speckled trout and redfish for groceries. The best fishing for this fishy trifecta is between the Robert Edge Parkway in North Myrtle Beach and the state line, where all three species feed in the same types of habitats.

Cushman concentrates on places where fish can easily ambush bait, including the access to marinas, creek mouths and docks.

"For most of the day, fish may hold in the deeper water and then transition up on the shallower ledges along the ICW to feed," Cushman said. "Most of the ledges contain hardbottom, rock, or some sort of horizontal or vertical structure and the fish will patrol these areas to feed. The inlet at Coquina Harbor is typically a good place to find stripers, redfish and trout in December."

These fish aren't real picky this time of year, and anything small enough for them to swallow can be a contender for an upcoming meal. Both soft plastics and hard baits are good options. ■

— Jeff Burleson

Murrells Inlet up next >

MURRELLS INLET TROUT

Float a shrimp for
great December specks



Plenty of big speckled trout move out to the ends of Murrells Inlet's jetties when December and cooler water arrives.

Just before Christmas, when the inshore water temperatures plummet towards seasonal lows, many anglers are ready to throw in the towel. But they don't have to.

The rock jetties that armor many of the inlets along the South Carolina coastline will support a healthy population of big, fat speckled trout that are suckers for a live shrimp fished under a slip cork, and the jetties protecting Murrells Inlet are famed for holding big specks during the last month of the year.

Murrells Inlet is not a big estuary, by any means, but it can pack a big punch. It is predominantly a saltwater estuary with very little freshwater input. As the cold fronts of streamroll into the area, trout increase their feeding as much as possible. Anglers can use both artificial

lures and live bait to trigger a feeding frenzy without too much trouble. But for anglers looking for trout on the larger end of the spectrum, the rock jetties just may be the best place to spend a December day.

Guide Alex Hrycak at Marlin Quay's Marina concentrates on the jetties for big trout this month.

"December is prime time to float live shrimp at the jetties," said Hrycak (843-651-4444).

"The jetties tend to get a lot of big fish stacked up on the rocks this time of year, where you get smaller schooling fish between 12 to 14 inches inside the creeks of the estuary."

While Hrycak may hit Oaks or Garden City creeks, the jetties will be his primary destination; who wants to catch schoolies when there are gators a short drive away?

Typically, big trout spend more time in the ocean than the estuaries, which makes the jetties perfect places to trap bait and offer a feeding opportunity for trout and other predators.

Hrycak likes to fish the jetties on the lower end of the tide.

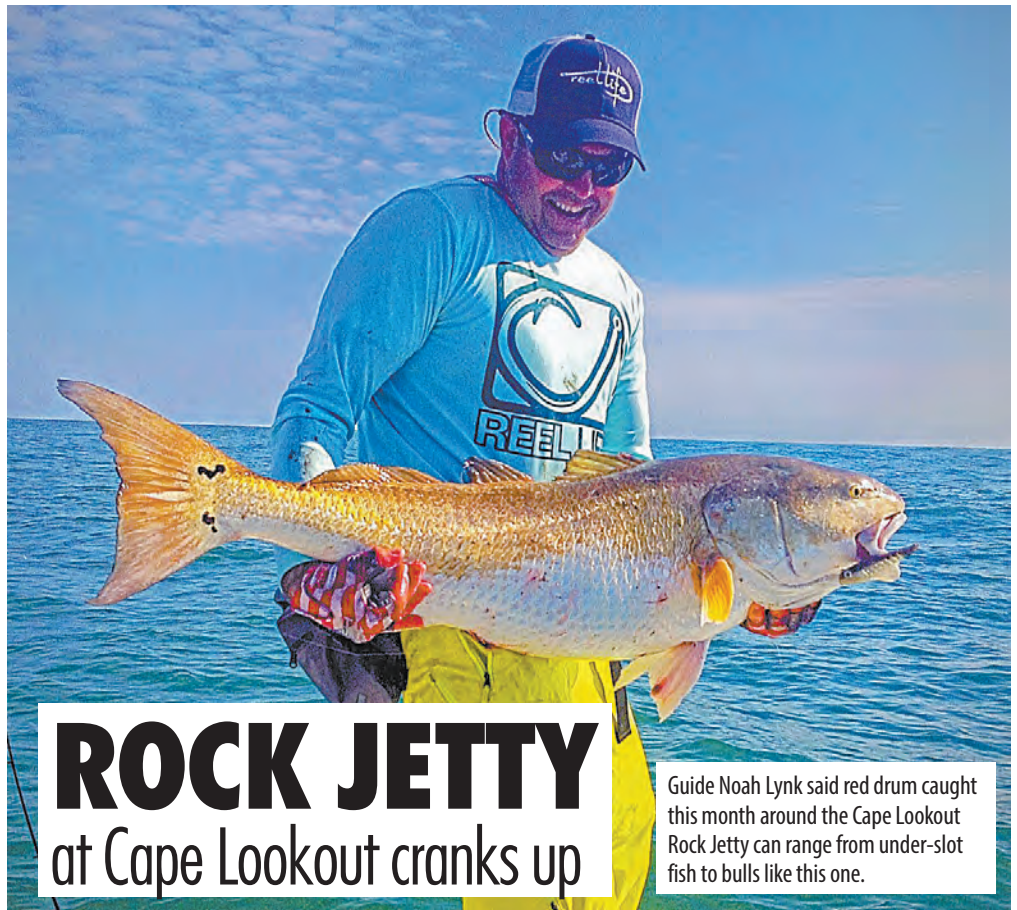
"On low tide, there is less water going through the rocks, and the bait is pulled out to the edges," he said.

Rock jetties cover a much larger area than they appear to. Even on low portions of the tide cycle, rocks extend much further into the water.

"There are scattered rocks 15 feet (past what you can see), and that is exactly where we like to drift shrimp to catch big trout," he said.

Since the water is still 10 to 12 feet deep along the rock fringe, Hrycak will use a slip cork and bobber stopper to sink shrimp down midway of the water column. ■

— Jeff Burluson



ROCK JETTY at Cape Lookout cranks up

Guide Noah Lynk said red drum caught this month around the Cape Lookout Rock Jetty can range from under-slot fish to bulls like this one.

December usually is a tough month for inshore saltwater anglers. With lower water temperatures the normal situation, most baitfish have fled south or into the ocean seeking warmer habitats, and gamefish, with an almost empty pantry in skinny waters, follow them.

However, Noah Lynk of Noah's Ark Fishing Charters, knows one place near his Harker's Island, N.C., home base that continues to produce some great inshore fishing while other anglers migrate south or opt for charters to the Gulf Stream.

"The water's usually clear (near inlets), so I go to the Cape Lookout rock jetty," he said. "Clear water means sunlight can warm up the jetty rocks, and that difference in the water's relative heat attracts baitfish."

Lynk said the jetty waters will be 4 or 5 degrees warmer than surrounding areas, so it holds baitfish such as mud minnows and croakers. The 2,500-foot jetty, built in 1914, is a few hundred yards southwest from the Cape Lookout Lighthouse near the tip of South Core Banks. The jetty is a mass of jagged, jumbled, barnacle-covered chunk rocks, almost invisible during high-tide periods and a couple hundred yards uncovered at low tide.

"Live baits work best if you can find them," said Lynk, who is partial to mud minnows.

Some anglers use shrimp pieces or artificial

fish bites if they can't find mud minnows.

"Artificial lures will work, too, for drum and trout," said Lynk (252-342-6911). "The normal drum sizes can be dinks to slot fish to 30-plus inches."

The weather and water temperature affects the numbers and sizes of both species available to anglers.

"If it's mild weather — which we have a good bit of in late November — fishing can be really good," said Lynk, whose tackle includes 7- to 7½-foot Star rods with 12-pound braid backing and P-line fluorocarbon leaders. He prefers a surgeon's knot to tie fluorocarbon to the braid main line.

"I like to fish mud minnows on float rigs at the jetty," Lynk said. "I think they get more bites, especially from drum."

Float-rig leaders vary from 2 to 4 feet, depending upon how close an angler wants to risk casting a bait near the rocks.

"Soft-plastic lures such as Fishbites scented curlytails, paddletails, jerkbaits or Fightin' Shrimp will catch trout and drum," he said.

"The problem is leadhead jigs often hang in the rocks, and you'll lose a lot of 'em."

When the big trout bite is hot, Lynk likes to throw Mirrolures and has caught some giant specks at the jetty in winter. ■

— Craig Holt

Lake Murray up next >

FOLLOW THOSE BIRDS

to hungry Lake Murray striped bass

Striper fishing on Lake Murray is very good this month, and catching fish is pretty simple, according to guide Brad Taylor.

“Just look for the birds.”

The birds, mostly seagulls that have migrated inland for the winter, hover over and dive into dead and injured threadfin shad driven to the surface by feeding stripers underneath.

The frenzy that erupts is a symbiotic relationship between the birds and the fish. The water chilled by winter temperatures makes the shad lethargic and easy prey for the stripers

Pat Robertson

Guide Brad Taylor finds striped bass hanging out under schools of threadfin shad whose metabolisms have been slowed by colder water.

gathering underneath. The stripers bust into pods of bait seeking an easy meal, and what they don't eat floats to the surface, where it is spotted by keen-eyed birds also looking for an easy meal.

"That time of year, you can just about cut the depth finder off and just look for the birds," Taylor said. "There are tons of opportunity for anyone with the simplest of equipment to catch fish."

While the birds are picking up their lunch off the surface, the striped bite is not a surface bite, said Taylor (803-331-1354).

"The fish are not really breaking the surface when they are feeding," he said. "They are boiling the surface. Most of the bite happens sub-surface, so you have to cast some kind of bait to retrieve underwater to catch them. The most-popular bait is a double rig: a bucktail jig and Ice Fly. The bucktail acts as the weight to get the Ice Fly down and also as an added attractant. It is very common to catch two fish at once on this rig."

Taylor said Flukes also work, and some anglers like to cast crankbaits, but he prefers the Ice Fly/bucktail rig so he doesn't have to deal with treble hooks when the action is fast and furious.

"Another very popular way to catch stripers this time of year is the free-line, planer board bite," Taylor said. "Most of the fish caught this way are above average in size."

Most anglers prefer gizzard shad for bait on the planer boards, he said, but blueback herring work well also.

"You can fish planer boards anywhere in the water column. There is no recipe; you just have to cover water to find out what is happening with the fish," he said.

Most of the action on stripers this time of year is found from Buffalo Creek all the way up to the Little Saluda and Big Saluda river systems, he said.

"Limits of 6-pound to 8-pound fish is very common this time of year in the schools and it is not uncommon to catch fish in the teens," said Taylor. ■

— Pat Robertson

Groupier up next >

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The author caught this red grouper off North Carolina's southeastern coast. After Dec. 31, the shallow-water grouper fishery will close for four months.



Jerry Dilsaver

LAST-GASP BOTTOM-FISHING HEADLINES SENC COASTLINE

December will be the last month to target gag, black, scamp and red grouper until May as the annual spawning closure begins Jan. 1. Fishermen along North Carolina's southeastern coast should take advantage of the usually calm seas to visit the productive bottom-fishing areas offshore of Frying Pan Tower. Gag and black grouper may be caught as shallow as 60 feet, but the best action begins at about 100 feet and moves offshore.

Other offshore bottomfish species will also be biting well. Fishermen should expect to find beeliners, triggerfish, black sea bass, porgies and grunts — and there may even be a few African pompano and hog snapper in the area.

The primary fishing method is simple. Whole cigar minnows, sardines, chub mackerel and smaller menhaden are dropped to the bottom around likely grouper habitat. Some fishermen also like to fish live pinfish, menhaden and cigar minnows.

When a grouper hits, the immediate struggle is to keep it from getting into a hole in the rocks or wreck where it's living. Then it becomes a tug of war. Other bottomfish will readily hit chunks of squid, cut bait, cigar minnows or sardines, and strikes often come as doubles. Sometimes a grouper gets jealous or curious and nails one of these baits.

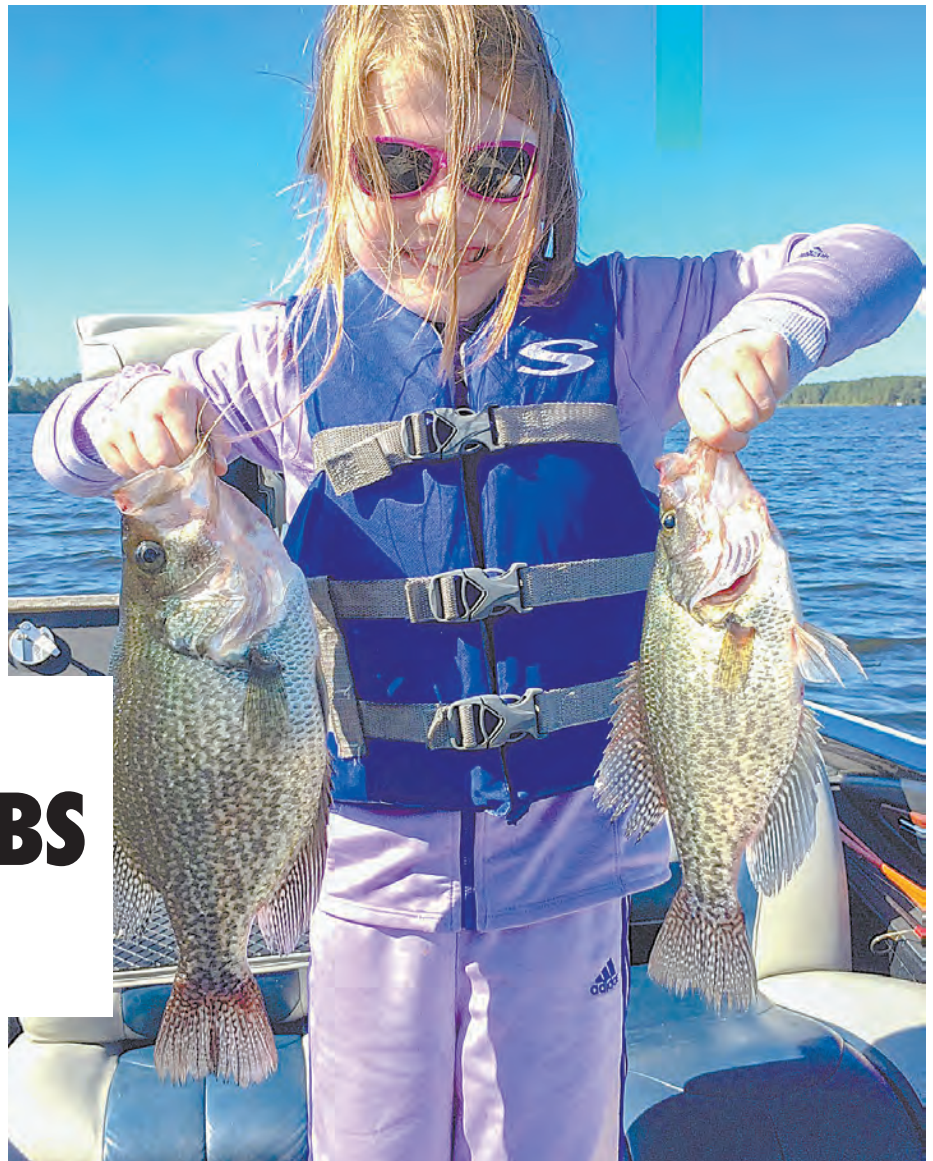
Fishermen from Wrightsville Beach to Sunset Beach have easy access to offshore

structure that holds an abundance of bottomfish. Some of the well known places are the Tower Reef, Red and White Reef, Snapper Charlie's and 150/350, and there are many other rocks, ledges and wrecks scattered around that hold a variety of bottomfish.

Offshore bottomfish are highly protected, and many are managed with restrictive regulations and limits. Shallow-water grouper (gag, black grouper, red grouper, scamp, red hind, rock hind, coney, graysby, yellowfin and yellowmouth grouper) are managed with an aggregate limit of 3, but only one can be a black or gag grouper. ■

— Jerry Dilsaver

Cooler December weather drives crappie to deep brush piles and stumps in Shearon Harris Lake. Troll jigs or fish dropper rigs vertically for slabs of good quality.



CELEBRATE HARRIS SLABS

Water temperature plays big role in crappie hot spots

While December may be the time to hang up your Christmas stockings in anticipation of the holidays, it's not the month to stow your fishing tackle if you want to catch quality crappie at Shearon Harris Lake south of Raleigh, N.C.

"December offers the opportunity to catch stringers of crappie from 10 to 12 inches with the possibility of reeling in some of the biggest fish of the year that will eclipse the 2-pound mark," said Joel Munday of Outdoor Expeditions Guide Service.

Though December crappie fishing can be rewarding, Munday (919-669-2959) said it's also a tricky time of the year to locate fish because of changing weather patterns that move the fish about.

"The critical factor this month is water temperature," said Munday. "When the water temperature is in the upper 50s, the crappie linger in 15 to 20 feet of water over brush and stumps and other cover. When the water temperature drops below 50 degrees, the fish move 25 to 35 feet deep and favor main-lake points and

ridges. An Indian summer could move them to 8 to 10 feet."

When the fish are in 20 feet of water or less, Munday slow-trolls at 1 mph with an array of rods mounted on the sides of his boat to sample various depths. His jigs range from $\frac{1}{16}$ - to $\frac{1}{4}$ -ounce.

"I'll fish the smallest-size jig I can get away with once I locate the fish," said Munday, whose color choices include John Deere green, white, electric chicken and chartreuse.

His tackle consists of medium/light to medium-action 13 Fishing spinning rods paired with 13 Fishing Creed GT spinning reels holding 8- to 10-pound line.

Munday said crappie can be found anywhere there's forage, but he favors the lower portion of the lake.

When cold weather pushes the crappie deeper than 20 feet on main-lake points, Munday switches to live crappie minnows,

using a dropper rig with monofilament for the main line and fluorocarbon line for a leader with a No. 1 Aberdeen hook for the bait holder. His sinker weighs $\frac{3}{16}$ - to $\frac{1}{2}$ -ounce; the weight selected is determined by the water depth and wind.

Munday's electronics play an essential role for targeting deep fish and their suspended depth and finding them in conjunction with forage.

Harris is a fairly stable lake in respect to water level and water clarity, so those factors aren't as important as they are on other lakes.

"You can see your baits about 2 feet under the water," Munday said. "Harris isn't like High Rock where water level and water clarity are major concerns." ■

— Tony Garitta

STATE-PARK REDS ARE HOT

Hunting Island offers great December fishing



Bull reds hang out in the slough between Hunting Island State Park's beach and a big sandbar that runs just offshore.

Brian Cope

This time of year, many anglers have winterized their boats and stowed their gear, but they are missing out on some great fishing. Redfish in South Carolina's Lowcountry are especially active and eager to feed this month, and it's a great time to catch your personal best, as well as some slot-sized fish for the frying pan.

Zane Iverness of Honea Path, S.C., spends this entire month camping at Hunting Island State Park, and he fishes almost every day. Aside from keeping himself

fed with keeper redfish, he enjoys targeting bull reds in two main areas: Johnson Creek, and just in front of the state park's beach, within sight of Fripp Island.

"I make two trips from Honea Path at the beginning of the month. I pull my camper, then I go back home to get my boat and bring it down. It's just a john boat; that's all you need to have plenty of good fishing," he said.

Iverness starts most mornings casting lipless crankbaits in Johnson Creek, and even though he gets mixed results from one day to the next, he catches enough

to keep his interest up.

"You can really rack up the redfish one morning, and then the next day, nothing — but you never know," he said. "They bite often enough that I'll rarely miss a morning doing this, and you'll catch some in all sizes from rats on up to 40-inch fish. It's a great way to wake up."

His favorites baits are ½-ounce saltwater-rated Rat-L-Traps in Electric Chicken and chrome/blue back.

"I like it best on the high end of the rising tide, and I'll fish on through the full high tide," Iverness said. "I mainly stay close to where Johnson Creek opens up to the ocean and on into the creek until the (US) 21 bridge. I'll catch a lot of them in what you would consider no-man's land, just along the bare banks where it doesn't look like much is going on.

"I drop anchor about 6 feet off the bank, then cast parallel to the bank. I just cast and reel pretty steady. If they're there and hungry, they'll smash it," he said.

For afternoon and evening fishing, Iverness heads to his other spot.

"Just off the tip of Hunting Island and right across from Fripp, there's a big sandbar. It extends way down the state park's beach. You can catch a lot of redfish in the area between the sandbar and the beach," he said. "This is where I mainly catch bulls. I've caught 48- and a 49-inch fish on back-to-back casts here in the winter using 6-inch Gulp grubs in new penny (color) on jigheads in the ¼-ounce to ½-ounce range," he said.

Iverness uses a fairly slow retrieve with occasional pops of his rod tip.

"It's my favorite time of year to fish, without a doubt. You've got fewer people and boats to deal with, you have some really nice 60-plus degree days, and even the cooler days are rarely all that cold. I don't know why more people don't fish this time of year. I think the fish bite better now too," he said. ■

— Brian Cope

ROCK THOSE WATERREE BASS IN DECEMBER

Find clear water in lower end of lake, target rocky banks

For bass pro Dearnal Rodgers of Camden, S.C., successful fishing on Lake Wateree this month and throughout the winter means one thing: bass on the rocks.

"Bass fishing can be great in December on Lake Wateree, if the water color and weather cooperate," he said. "That time of year, I usually like to fish down the lake, typically from Beaver Creek on down to the dam, because this area has steeper banks and a lot more rocks."

Rocky areas are key this time of year, Rodgers said, because the rocks hold heat from sunshine, and they are more prominent around steeper drops. The water near rocky areas is warmer than other parts of the lake, and that attracts baitfish such as threadfin shad and small bream: favorite foods for bass. The rocks also are prime habitat for crayfish, which are like candy to a hungry largemouth.

"I generally look for rocky points or steep

rocky banks in the first third of a creek or on the main lake," Rodgers said. "Clear water or no more than stained water is a must for me at Wateree. Also, a warming trend weather pattern can also help tremendously."

Rodgers said his favorite lures for this rock-fishing include a No. 5, No. 7 and sometimes a No. 8 Rapala Shad Rap in shad or crawfish patterns, a ½-ounce green-pumpkin Buckeye Mop Jig with a crawfish trailer, or a shad-colored Rat-L-Trap, especially when bait or birds are present.

"The bass this time of year may be suspended off a point or a rocky bank. When they get ready to eat, they will cruise up and down that rocky area," said Rodgers. "Bass will use these rocky hot spots until April, so if you find a good one it can pay off until spring." ■

— Pat Robertson



Bass pro Dearnal Rodgers said water around rocky points and banks is warm enough to draw bass shallow.

Lake Gaston up next >

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Zakk Royce has perfected techniques for catching huge blue catfish from Lake Gaston along the Virginia-North Carolina border.



GASTON'S BIG CATS ON FEED

Drag perch chunks around tight schools of baitfish

Many cold-weather fishermen say that the best part of the winter is having the lake all to themselves.

But if you're a fisherman who targets catfish at Lake Gaston, you're liable to be sharing it with some of the biggest blues of the year. They will be shadowing massive baitfish schools in deeper channels, and dragging a chunk of white perch will put them over the gunwale.

"The colder months are really good for big blues," said Zakk Royce (252-398-7192), who runs Blues Brothers Catfish Guide Service and caught back-to-back North Carolina record blues at Gaston in December 2015. "They'll be keying in on schools of bait like shad and white perch instead of the freshwater mussels they were feeding on in the warmer months. That makes them easier to find and catch."

Ground zero for Royce in December will be the main-river channel and deeper creek channels that are harboring schools of baitfish. He regularly catches blues in 40 to 50 feet of water, but he has been successful all the way to 90 feet, Gaston's deepest depths. With any luck, a flock of diving seagulls will give away feeding stripers pushing baitfish near the surface, but the baitfish are easily picked up on depth-finding units.

"You get a lot of striper activity under the schools of shad," Royce said. "That draws the blues in to pick up the scraps. They're almost always under them or nearby."

Royce will be dragging his baits on the bottom, under the baitfish, a majority of the time this month — trolling at no more than a ½-mile an hour. He runs a 6-rod spread: two straight back, two off the gunwales, and two on side planers. On

each line is a 3-way drift rig comprised of a 1½- to 2-ounce slinky weight and a 12- to 48-inch leader tied to a 9/0 circle hook with a 3-inch peg float in the middle. White perch is the winter bait of choice.

"Perch are easy to get, and they work really well," Royce said. "The shad are so deep that it's hard to get a cast net down to them effectively. Perch stay in the creeks pretty much year-round unless really cold weather moves them out to the main lake."

Perch also feed on smaller threadfin shad and can be found near schools of them in the creeks. Dropping a Sabiki rig to them will load an angler with enough bait for a day's fishing in no time. ■

— Dusty Wilson

ODIN LURES' FRIGG PLUG

Any time an angler can offer up a lure that appeals to a fish's senses of sight and sound, he's making it hard on the fish to resist. The Odin Lures' Frigg Plug does that with its prominent profile, water-splashing cupped face, and interior rattle chamber — and then takes things a step further by allowing anglers to add their patented Fish Smack liquid scent attractant to the lure's hollow, hard-plastic body.

Before casting, anglers squeeze the liquid into the mouth of the lure, which then releases the Fish Smack through its gill cutouts as the angler works it along the surface. With every pop of the lure, the grease-like mixture slowly oozes out, leaving a slick of the scent that seals the deal on fish that otherwise might just look up, then look away.

The Frigg Plug is available in four different sizes and numerous colors, and the Fish Smack is available in several different scents, so you've got options no matter what species you're after. And when they bite, the ultra-sharp VMC treble hooks hold won't let your prey get away. MSRP: \$19.95 to \$29.95.

More Info: www.odinlures.com



VASQUE'S SAGA GT BOOTS

Hiking boots aren't hunting boots, and hunting boots aren't hiking boots. So what happens when you need both, when you've got a long, long hike to your deer stand, and you have no ATV?

Vasque's new SAGA GT boots might just fit the bill perfectly. A division of Red Wing Shoe Company, Vasque's offering in the hiking/backpacking market is an extremely comfortable boot that has what a lot of boots don't: great room in the toe area. Made for hiking in rugged, rocky terrain, the SAGA model has plenty of GORE-TEX insulation for cold weather and molded ventilation ports for all-weather comfort. They weigh 2 ounces short of 2 pounds and are an extremely comfortable boot. If you've got a mile walk to your deer stand and you don't have an ATV, they might be just the ticket for you. MSRP is \$229.

More Info: www.vasque.com



ABU GARCIA'S REVO ROCKET BAITCASTING REEL

Talk about a fast baitcasting reel. ABU Garcia's Revo Rocket takes retrieve ratio to an unheard of level at 10:1. You get 41 inches of line back in for every turn of the reel handle, which has got to result in dozens of extra casts over the course of a day on the water.

And speed isn't all you get. The low-profile reel comes with 10 stainless-steel ball bearings and one roller bearing, an alloy frame and sideplate, ABU Garcia's Carbon Matrix Drag System, an Infini break system and D2 gear system.

The reel weighs slightly more than 7 ounces and has a line capacity of 190 yards of 20-pound braid and 175 yards of 10-pound mono. MSRP is \$299.

More Info: www.abugarcia.com



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