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NUMBERS LOW

FEBRUARY 2020

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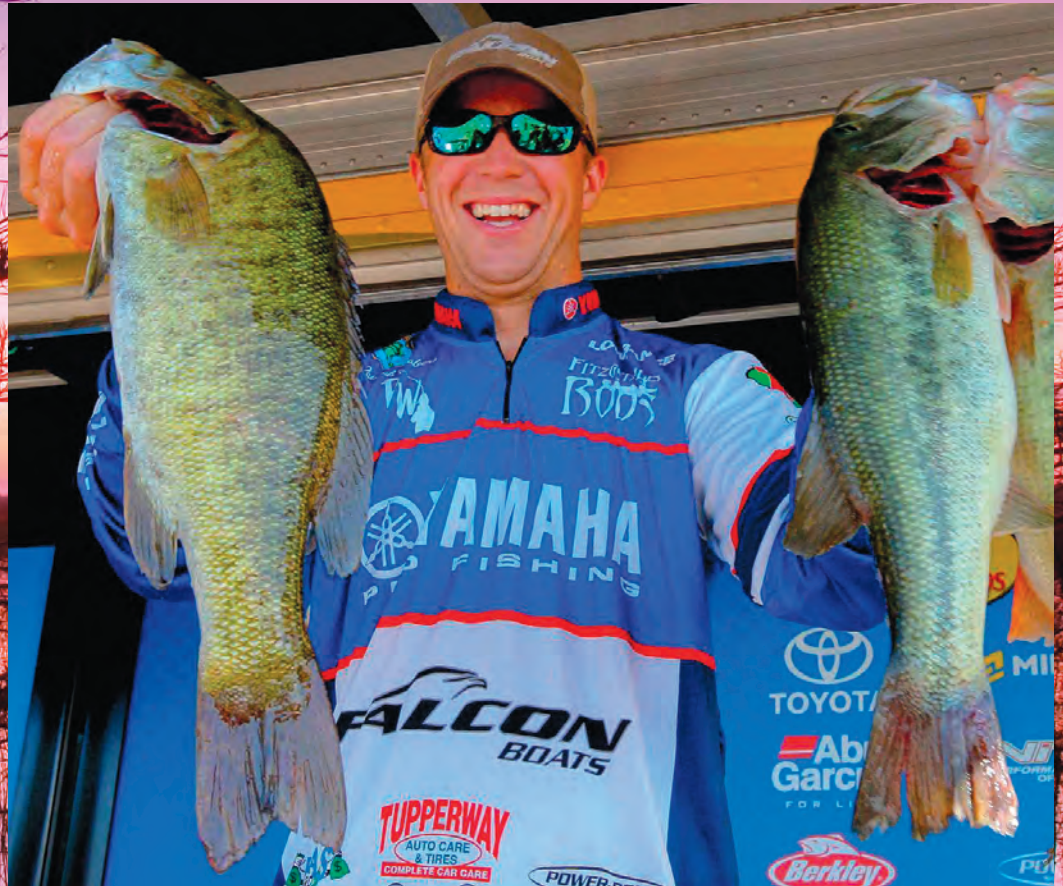
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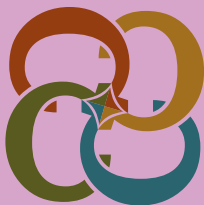
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25

COLD CRAPPIE CATCHING



# Carolina CONTENTS

Volume 27 | Number 2 | February 2020

## FEATURES:

### 15 DEER OF THE YEAR 2019

A state-record buck for North Carolina and more than enough trophies to go around in a tremendous season.

>>>By Dan Kibler

### 25 COLD CRAPPIE CATCHING COVER STORY

Many anglers targeting other species are waiting for March, but February offers slab hunters plenty of action on lakes around the Carolinas, if you know what you're doing.

>>>By Brian Cope

### 35 CHILL OUT WITH BIG BASS

Stay close to deep water and go with big lures for February bass that are ready to put on the feed bag in the right situations.

>>>By Jeff Burleson

### 49 TURN THE SURF RED

Beaches along North Carolina's central coast fill with huge schools of redfish in cold months. Use these lessons for plenty of action.

>>>By Jerry Dilsaver



### 56 HOGS AFTER DARK

Get the right equipment and get the drop on a porker after the sun goes down. The dark hours are prime time to take out some wild hogs.

>>>By Terry Madewell

## FISHING HOTSPOTS:

30 Kerr Lake crappie

44 Fontana smallmouth

45 Wateree bass

74 Little River specks

75 Hartwell stripers

75 NC river stripers

76 High Rock stripers

77 Cape Fear stripers

78 Stono River specks

79 Murrells Inlet

bottomfish

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**35**  
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**BIG BASS,  
BIG BAIT'S**



**49**  
TURN THE  
**SURF RED**

OUTDOOR UPDATE:

**10 NC CONSIDERS BANNING DEER URINE PRODUCTS**

**11 NC HUNTER WINS BAG-A-BUCK CONTEST**

PLUS

**12 SC FLOUNDER WOES**

COLUMNS:

**40 LUNKER LINES** By Davy Hite

**42 SANTEE STRINGER**  
By Terry Madewell

**60 SOUND & SEA** By Brian Cope

**62 GREENER PASTURES**  
By Jeff Burleson

**64 SMALL CRAFT ADVISORY**  
By Phillip Gentry

**66 COOKING ON THE WILD SIDE**  
By Capt. Jerry Dilsaver

**70 HEAD FOR THE MOUNTAINS**  
By Robert Satterwhite

**72 SPECKLED TRUTH** By Chris Bush

ON THE COVER:



Pro crappie fisherman Whitey Outlaw shares tips for catching winter slabs. Photo by Brian Cope.

DEPARTMENTS:

**48** NC Hunting Regulations

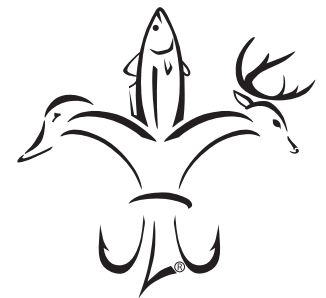
**48** SC Hunting Regulations

**65** Astro Tables

**80** Classifieds

**81** Hunting/Fishing Scrapbook

**84** Advertiser Index



Carolina  
**SPORTSMAN**  
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**CAROLINA SPORTSMAN** (USPS #012969) is published monthly by Carolina Publishing Inc., Allen J. Lottinger, President. 14236 Highway 90, P.O. Box 1199, Boutte, LA 70039. Mailed at periodicals postage rates and paid at Boutte, La., and additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to Carolina Sportsman, PO Box 433294, Palm Coast, FL 32143. All rights reserved. Reproduction of contents is strictly prohibited without permission of Carolina Sportsman. **EDITORIAL** information number is 336.376.5101. Editorial guidelines can be obtained by writing Carolina Sportsman, 433 Holinswood Ave., Winston-Salem, N.C. 27103. Carolina Sportsman is not responsible for the loss of queries, manuscripts or other materials.

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**Dan Kibler** is managing editor of *Carolina Sportsman* magazine. He has been covering outdoors issues full-time since 1985.

*Dan Kibler*

# WILL NC BAN DEER URINE PRODUCTS?

## COMMISSION'S PROPOSED RULE CHANGE MATCHES OTHER STATES' MOVES

**L**ike many game and fish agencies across the Southeast, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission is taking dead aim at stopping the spread of chronic wasting disease into the state's deer herd.

At public hearings around North Carolina in January, the Commission presented a proposed rule change that would make it illegal to use real deer urine in any form as an attractant or cover scent during deer season.

The proposal would "prohibit the use of cervid excrement (urine, feces, saliva, and other bodily fluids) for taking or attracting wildlife."

Chronic wasting disease is a contagious neurological disease affecting deer, elk and moose. It causes a characteristic spongy degeneration of the brains of infected

animals, resulting in emaciation, abnormal behavior, loss of bodily functions and death. It is always fatal. It is believed that CWD is transmitted between animals via saliva and urine, and it has been commonly associated with but not limited to deer-farming operations.

CWD has been confirmed in 26 states — Mississippi being the most recent — three Canadian provinces and three countries outside North America: Korea, Finland and Norway. Two states that border North Carolina have confirmed cases of CWD: Virginia and Tennessee.

Natural urine-based products are collected almost exclusively from deer farms or other operations involving penned-in deer. Obviously, companies marketing natural urine-based attractants have cried foul at every turn when it comes to banning urine products.

Nine states have outlawed the use of natural deer-urine products, while still allowing the use of synthetic deer attractants. South Carolina and Mississippi are states that have outlawed it most recently. South Carolina allows hunters to use urine or glands from deer taken in-state. Mississippi altered its original ban to allow hunters to use urine-based products from brands that have been tested for CWD and approved by the Archery Trade Association and carried that association's seal of approval on their labels. North Carolina's current proposal makes no such allowances.

The Commission will now collect and summarize all public comments on the proposal, and it will vote at a future meeting whether to go forward with the new regulation — which would take effect Aug. 1, 2020 — stick with the regulations now in effect or do a little of both. The vote would take place in a month or so.

The big question remaining is whether or not North Carolina's deer farmers can find anybody they can pay off to influence the Commission's decision. More than five years ago, an aggressive lobbying campaign, including \$20,000 in well-placed contributions to politicians, resulted in North Carolina's state legislature taking away oversight of deer-farming operations from the Commission and giving it to the state department of agriculture, which doesn't have nearly as much power to punish those who ignore restrictions and regulations. ■



Miles Cothran, 10, killed this nice buck in Clarendon County, S.C., this past November.

# NC HUNTER WINS DECEMBER BAG-A-BUCK CONTEST



Ronnie Moore of Wilson won the December Bag-A-Buck contest with this 9-point, Halifax County trophy.

Finally, a buck slowed down a little. Ronnie Moore of Wilson, N.C., hadn't gotten a shot at several bucks crossing a narrow logging road between two pine cutovers in late November in Halifax County. With the bucks chasing does across the road between 300 and 500 yards away, he didn't have time to get his 7 Mag to his shoulder and let fly.

But that changed on Nov. 29, when a beautiful, 9-point buck stepped out in the logging road, about 15 minutes behind a doe, and stopped for a couple of seconds 135 yards from Moore's box blind.

Moore shot the buck through both shoulders, and it dropped on the spot. On Dec. 1, he entered it in *Carolina Sportsman's* Bag-A-Buck contest, and he was drawn on Jan. 1 as the winner for December's monthly contest.

Moore will receive a one-year subscription to *Carolina Sportsman* and a \$25 gift certificate to the online Sportsman's Store. He will be eligible, along with every other contest entry, for the grand prize: a two-year deer/hog combo hunt for two people at Cherokee Run Hunting Lodge in Chesterfield County, S.C., a \$50 gift certificate to the online Sportsman's Store, a three-year subscription to *Carolina Sportsman* and an Energy Elite bow.

"I had seen bucks crossing several times in the days before that, but they were chasing does," Moore said. "This time, he wasn't chasing. He made a mistake and stepped out and stopped at about 135 yards. He dropped right there. It's a good thing, because he was going into a 7-year-old cutover you can't walk through." ■

## NC ANGLER BOATS HUGE WALLEYE

When Bryan Justice felt something 40 feet below the surface of Lake James slam his home-made jigging spoon at daylight on Dec. 7, he figured it would be one of the fish he was targeting, a largemouth bass.

"It felt like a largemouth hitting; it immediately shook its head and came right up. When he took it, I said, 'Whoa, be a good one,'" said Justice, a 30-year-old warehouse manager from Arden, N.C., who is an avid bass fisherman. "I told the guy who was fishing with me, Tom Wilburn, 'Get the net, it's a giant. If it's a bass, it's a 10-pounder.'"

A few seconds later, the big fish came into view.

Yep, it was sure green, and it was surely a giant, but it surely wasn't a bass.

It was his first walleye.

"It came up and almost swan-dived into the net," Justice said.

That must have been some kind of dive, since the huge, green fish in the net was 28½ inches long and weighed 8.2 pounds — a monster anywhere in North America but almost unheard of in the South and in North Carolina in particular.

"I said, 'It's a walleye,'" Justice said. "I didn't think they got that big down South."

James, a 6,812-acre reservoir impounded on the Linville and Catawba rivers in 1919 by Duke Power, has a naturally reproducing walleye population, but the fish is so popular among recreational anglers that the N.C. Wildlife Resources



Bryan Justice of Arden, N.C., landed this 8.2-pound walleye from Lake James on Dec. 7 while jigging for bass in 40 feet of water.

Commission stocks 180,000 fingerlings annually.

Justice has spent plenty of time on the lake, but he's usually there for the bass: smallmouths and largemouths. The big walleye, which struck before 7 a.m., was hanging around a brush pile in 40 feet of water off a main-lake point on the lake's Catawba River arm. Justice called it "one of my best bass holes."

"I've caught some big smallmouth at James," he said.

The jigging spoon he was using was a 1-ounce, homemade version painted white, carrying two treble hooks. Justice said one hook was in the walleye's toothy mouth, and the other was hooked on the outside of its face.

Justice caught the walleye on a 7-foot, Duckett Micro Magic baitcasting rod mated with an Abu-Garcia reel spooled with 15-pound fluorocarbon.

North Carolina's state-record walleye has stood for 35 years. It was caught in 1986 from Lake Chatuge and weighed 13½ pounds. ■

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# SC FLOUNDER NUMBERS LOW

**F**ishermen who have noticed fewer flounder in South Carolina waters weren't imagining anything, at least according to the S.C. Department of Natural Resources.

In response to a regional study showing a huge decline in the number of southern flounder from the Carolinas to Florida, biologists from SCDNR looked further into flounder in South Carolina waters and came to the same conclusion: flounder numbers are at their lowest level on record.

Dr. Joey Ballinger, SCDNR's lead flounder biologist, said, "The data are clear, with evidence of declines in flounder across the entire state and catches in recent years at all-time lows. This decline doesn't seem to be confined to one area of the state. We observed it in all of our major estuaries."

Low numbers of adult flounder were not the only red flag that appeared in the data. The surveys also showed a decline in young flounder and a decline in the average size of flounder caught.

"Our results also suggest the average size of flounder encountered in our surveys has declined by over an inch over the last 10 years or so," said Dr. Ballinger. "This is often a sign of heavy fishing pressure, since people are removing the fish as soon as they reach minimum size requirements, with very few bigger fish remaining in the population."

Since 2007, the minimum size limit for keeping flounder has increased from 12 to 15 inches; the bag limit has decreased from 20 to 10 fish per person per day; and the daily boat limit was changed from no limit to 20 fish per boat per day, but the changes have not yet shown much positive impact on the population. ■

# NC PUTS SLOT LIMIT ON OCEAN-CAUGHT STRIPERS

**A** slot limit for recreationally caught striped bass went into effect Jan. 1 in North Carolina ocean waters.

Fishermen are allowed to possess one striped bass per person per day that is at least 28 inches and less than 35 inches total length. The previous regulations were a one-fish daily reel limit and a 28-inch size minimum.

The slot limit is required by the Atlantic Striped Bass Interstate Fishery Management Plan. It is designed to end overfishing and bring fishing mortality to the target level in 2020 by reducing total coastwide striped bass removals by 18%. The latest coastwide stock assessment determined that ocean migratory Atlantic striped bass are overfished, and overfishing is occurring. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's action also requires a coastwide commercial quota reduction of 18%. The recreational regulations for striped bass in internal coastal waters remain unchanged. ■

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2:40 <b>\$500</b>	3:44 Savage Axis II 6.5 Creedmoor w/ scope	4:44 <b>\$500</b>
2:44 Savage R-93 17HMR w/scope	3:48 <b>\$500</b>	4:48 DPMS Oracle 308 AR-10
2:48 <b>\$500</b>	3:52 S&W EZ Shield 380	4:52 Half & Half Drawing
2:52 Ruger 10-22	3:56 <b>\$500</b>	4:56 <b>\$5000</b>
2:56 <b>\$500</b>	4:00 Half & Half Drawing	5:00 <b>\$10,000</b>



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Tory Pegg of Kernersville, N.C., destroyed the state record for the biggest non-typical archery buck with this 197 $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch Guilford County monster taken on Sept. 7, 2019.

DEER OF THE YEAR

2019

■ By Dan Kibler

A STATE-RECORD BUCK FOR NORTH CAROLINA AND MORE THAN ENOUGH TROPHIES TO GO AROUND IN A TREMENDOUS SEASON.

## WOULD HIS BIG BUCK STAY ON SCHEDULE?

That had to be the premier thought in the mind of Tory Pegg of Kernersville on Sept. 7, opening day of North Carolina's statewide archery season.

He had a huge non-typical buck coming to a mineral site in trail-camera photos on Thursday, Sept. 5, and Friday, Sept. 6, at around 7 p.m. Would the buck make it three nights in a row?

Just before dark on Sept. 7, Pegg got his answer. A few minutes later, he was standing over one of the biggest bucks ever killed in North Carolina, a 31-point, non-typical whitetail that wound up breaking a 13-year-old record by more than 20 inches.

Pegg's enormous Guilford County buck originally scored 199 $\frac{1}{2}$  points, and after the required 60-day drying period, it scored 197 $\frac{3}{8}$ — good for the Boone & Crockett Club's all-time record book and easily big enough to oust Brent Mabry's 176 $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch Halifax County buck taken in 2005 from the top spot.

Pegg's trophy buck is only the fifth non-typical whitetail from the Tarheel State to qualify for the Boone & Crockett Club. North

Carolina has produced 23 typical bucks that have qualified for the record book.

A handful of bucks taken this past season have a chance to join them, depending on how they score after the drying period and how many deductions are part of their tremendous preliminary scores.

Two extremely heavy racked bucks — Jared Troublefield's 175 $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch Anson County buck, taken Nov. 14, and Patrick Brown's 172 $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch Jackson County buck, taken Dec. 11 — are in the ballpark. North Carolina may have a new state-record for bucks taken by a female hunter with Lacie Layne's 166 $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch Alamance County monster, tagged Dec. 21.

The two biggest bucks reported from South Carolina last fall were both non-typicals: Lewis Hemingway's 181-inch Williamsburg County buck, taken Oct. 22, and Bryce Hinton's 181-inch, double-drop tine buck, taken Nov. 25 in Greenville County.

Enjoy taking a look at these beautiful bucks. Complete stories can be read by visiting [www.CarolinaSportsman.com](http://www.CarolinaSportsman.com) and clicking on the deer-hunting link. ■

**DEER-OF-THE-YEAR GALLERY** ➤

# DEER OF THE YEAR GALLERY



Megan Roland  
Calhoun County, S.C.  
Aug. 17  
146 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches



Thomas Gordy  
Aiken County, S.C.  
Aug. 17  
not scored



Andy Till  
Orangeburg County, S.C.  
Aug. 17, 167 inches



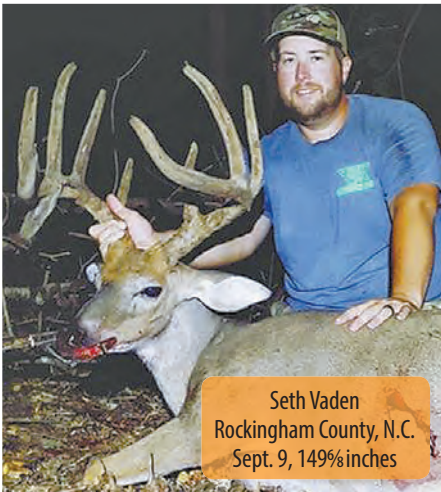
Ryan Long  
Guilford County, N.C.  
Sept. 7  
155 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches



James McCue  
Guilford County, N.C.  
Sept. 7  
155 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches



Tootie Morris  
Granville County, N.C.  
Sept. 7  
159 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches



Seth Vaden  
Rockingham County, N.C.  
Sept. 9, 149 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches



Brandon Johnson  
Surry County, N.C.  
Sept. 7, 160 inches



Jonathan Phillips  
Chatham County, N.C.  
Sept. 8, 137 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches



Don Hawkins  
Guilford County, N.C.  
Sept. 13, 157 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches



Daniel Clarida  
Rockingham County, N.C.  
Sept. 15, 150 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches



Brian Barton  
Hampton County, S.C.  
Oct. 2, not scored



Scott Taylor  
Rockingham County, N.C.  
Sept. 20, 140 inches



Ryan Inglehart  
Person County, N.C.  
Oct. 6  
135-inch 6-point



John Fuller  
Guilford County, N.C.  
Sept. 23, 150 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches



Katie Robinson Smith  
Sampson County, N.C.  
Oct. 18, 163 inches

# DEER OF THE YEAR GALLERY



Lewis Hemingway  
Williamsburg County, S.C.  
Oct. 22  
181 inches



Mark Wuori  
Lancaster County, S.C.  
Oct. 27, 162½ inches



Jordan Tucker  
Anson County, N.C.  
Nov. 2, 167 inches



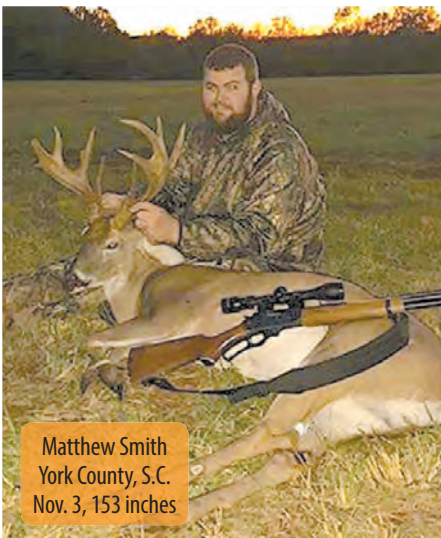
Chris Currin  
Granville County, N.C.  
Nov. 3, 140 inches



Andy Till  
Orangeburg County, S.C.  
Nov. 3  
142½ inches



Josh Kelly  
Harnett County, N.C.  
Nov. 3  
156 inches



Matthew Smith  
York County, S.C.  
Nov. 3, 153 inches



Jonathan Brown  
Stokes County, N.C.  
Nov. 4, 150 inches



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# DEER OF THE YEAR GALLERY



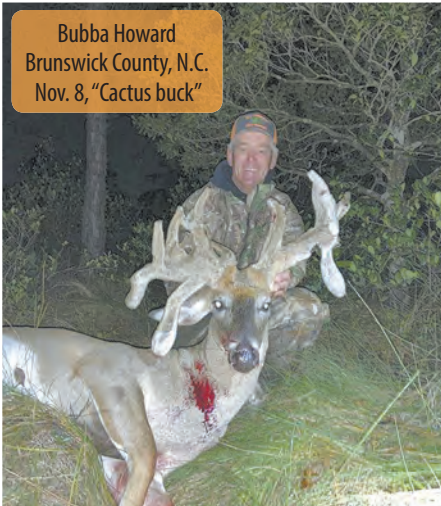
Brian Davis  
Randolph County, N.C.  
Nov. 5, 147 inches



Eric League  
Rockingham County, N.C.  
Nov. 7, 155½ inches



Bud Long  
Rockingham County, N.C.  
Nov. 8, 156 inches



Bubba Howard  
Brunswick County, N.C.  
Nov. 8, "Cactus buck"



Blake Leviner  
Chesterfield County, S.C.  
Nov. 9, 156 inches



Bug Long  
Person County, N.C.  
Nov. 11, 161 inches



Colton Haynes  
Yadkin County, N.C.  
Nov. 12, 147 inches



Curtis Vaughn  
Person County, N.C.  
Nov. 13, 174½ inches



John Lasher  
Durham County, N.C.  
Nov. 13, 140 inches



Scooter Pegg, Hunter Pegg  
Stokes County, Guilford County, N.C.  
Nov. 14, 150 inches, Nov. 22, 152½ inches



Jared Troublefield  
Anson County, N.C.  
Nov. 14, 175½ inches



Jesse Linville  
Rockingham County, N.C.  
Nov. 15, 142½ inches

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# DEER OF THE YEAR GALLERY



Dustin Jones  
Cleveland County, N.C.  
Nov. 22, 150 inches



Jamie Corley  
Savannah River  
Site, S.C.  
Nov. 22  
165 inches



Justice Ledford  
Moore County, N.C.  
Nov. 22, 157 inches



Tyler Lawhorn  
Sampson County, N.C.  
Nov. 23, 154 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches



Bryce Hinton  
Greenville  
County, S.C.  
Nov. 25  
181 inches



Rodney McDaris  
Buncombe County, N.C.  
Nov. 26, 170 inches



Justin Grindstaff  
Mitchell County, N.C.  
Nov. 27, 160 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches



Ervin Smith  
McDowell County, N.C.  
Nov. 28, not scored



Cole Miller  
Cleveland  
County, N.C.  
Nov. 28  
157 inches



Richard Allred  
Alamance County, N.C.  
Dec. 8, 147½ inches



Brayden Adams  
Marlboro County, S.C.  
Dec. 8, 163 inches



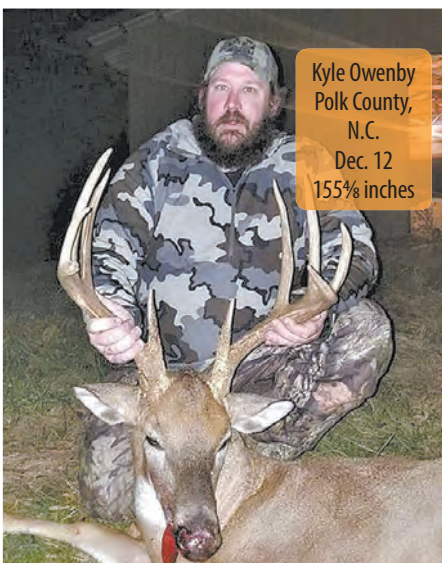
Derrick Taylor  
Moore County, N.C.  
Dec. 8, 142 inches



Patrick Brown  
Jackson County, N.C.  
Dec. 11, 172½ inches



Tyler Ransom  
Guilford County, N.C.  
Dec. 11, 160 inches



Kyle Owenby  
Polk County,  
N.C.  
Dec. 12  
155½ inches



Corey White  
Warren County, N.C.  
Dec. 14, 150 inches



Kevin Wike  
Macon County, N.C.  
Dec. 18, 161¾ inches

To read full stories about any of these trophy bucks, go to [www.carolinasportsman.com](http://www.carolinasportsman.com) and visit the deer-hunting section.

# DEER OF THE YEAR GALLERY

To read full stories about any of these trophy bucks, go to [www.carolinasportsman.com](http://www.carolinasportsman.com) and visit the deer-hunting section.



Lacey Laine  
Guilford County, N.C.  
Sept. 21, 143 inches



Lacey Laine  
Alamance County, N.C.  
Dec. 21, 166 1/2 inches



Tammy Tucker  
Stanly County, N.C.  
Dec. 20, 140 inches



Hunter Beltz  
Springfield, N.C.  
Dec. 30, not scored

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Harvey Yarbrough  
Rockingham County, N.C.  
Dec. 19, 150 inches

# COLD CRAPPIE CATCHING

MANY ANGLERS TARGETING OTHER SPECIES ARE WAITING FOR MARCH, BUT FEBRUARY OFFERS SLAB HUNTERS PLENTY OF ACTION ON LAKES AROUND THE CAROLINAS, IF YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING.

■ By Brian Cope



Brian Cope

# In February, many fishermen in the Carolinas are chomping at the bit for March, when most freshwater fish become more active. But they need not wait; **the crappie are biting just fine right now.**

Whitey Outlaw, co-host of *Father and Son Outdoors TV*, grew up fishing South Carolina's Santee Cooper lakes, but as a tournament crappie fisherman, he's fished all over the country, in every month, and he loves catching crappie in February.

"You're going to have the lake all to yourself on most days," he said, "and the crappie are eating just fine this time of year. You can really find them in several different types of areas of any given lake. You're going to find some deep on brush piles. You'll find some in shallower water real tight to the base of flooded timber. And you can catch some under floating weed mats.

"Sometimes, one type of area will produce better than others. Other days, you can catch them in all three types of areas. The key right now is to use smaller jigs; both the length and diameter of the jig should be a smaller profile than what you use in the spring. Tipping them with minnows is a good tactic, except when fishing those floating weeds."

When it comes to catching crappie deep on brush in February, Outlaw said every lake is different.

"February can be a bit tricky when it comes to finding crappie on brush or other sunken debris in deep water," he said. "If you're in a lake with depths of 45 to 60 feet or more, you should find plenty of fish stacked up on that debris. They'll be easy to spot on your electronics; you don't want to cast to them. Just use long poles and lower your baits to them. You want to have your bait within a foot of the highest fish in the school. If you're not getting bit, drop it down level with them."

Outlaw said on some days, the crappie just won't seem to bite, no matter what you do.

"If you still aren't getting bit but you see the

fish are there, it's best to move on to another brush pile until you find a different group of fish," he said. "But keep that first school in mind. You want to check on them later in the day. Sometimes, especially when it's real cold, the fish just eat in really short spells. It can be frustrating to know they are there and not get a bite. But don't waste too much time, because there are other fish that are willing to eat. You just have to find them."

Outlaw said many anglers overlook a lot of crappie in shallow water at the base of standing timber like cypress trees.

"Especially on a bright, sunny day, it doesn't matter how cold it is. The sun is going to heat



Brian Cope

those trees up, and that will carry under the water,” he said. “The crappie will gather real tight to the base of those trees. Tip a jig with a minnow and put it as tight to the tree as you can. Work your way around the whole tree. It’s a game of inches. If you’re not putting it right in their face, you’ll miss a lot of fish.

“Unlike deep brush piles, these fish won’t be gathered in great numbers. You might pick up two or three at the base of one tree, then two or three at the base of another tree a few feet away. But if you’ve got flooded, standing timber in your lake, you can limit out this way. Just stay on the move, be a little more patient, and don’t be afraid to get your jig snagged. That’s all a part of fishing this way. If that’s not happening here and there, you’re not fishing close enough to the cover, especially if you’re not catching fish.”



Matt Outlaw caught these two slabs on a deep brush pile during a cold day of fishing.



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One of Outlaw's favorite February tricks is catching slabs under thick, floating grass mats. These structures hold crappie throughout the year, but Outlaw said they are especially productive in the summer and in the winter.

"This is when you don't want a minnow on your jig," he said. "Minnows will swim into the weeds, and you'll get stuck every time. You want to fish this grass just like you do in the summer. Downsize your lures, and change colors often until you find what they're biting. Fishing grass beds is a color game," he said.

Outlaw prefers a 1/16-ounce jighead with a small Crappie Magnet jig. These jigs are short and small in diameter. He probes the holes between the floating vegetation in a vertical fashion. He also like Charlie Brewer Sliders, which he said spiral down like a propeller when jigged vertically.

Outlaw said patience is important when fishing this way, but he stressed that anglers shouldn't waste time if they aren't getting bit.

"Especially in a lake that has a lot of these grass mats, you need to move on to the next one if you aren't catching anything in a few minutes," he said. "Patience in fishing is really about taking the time to get prepared, get the boat situated properly, and in getting your lures into the right spots. It's not about sitting in one spot for 20 minutes without getting a bite." ■



Crappie pro Whitey Outlaw shows off a nice stringer of cold-weather crappie.



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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Braided line is not welcome in a crappie angler's boat. Bass fishermen love braid, one reason being its no-stretch properties needed for jaw-jarring hooksets.

That's exactly why crappie fishermen like Whitey Outlaw steer clear of braid.

"You'll rip a crappie's lips clean off with braided line," said Outlaw, who has lost his share of crappie even when using regular monofilament.

"It's a fact of life when crappie fishing," he said. "Their lips are like paper, and even when you boat a fish with regular monofilament, it's par for the course to see a hole in the fish's mouth. If you asked every tournament crappie angler how many fish they've lost because they couldn't quite get the fish to the net before their mouths tore and set them free, Lord have mercy, you couldn't count them all."

Outlaw teamed up with Slime Line, a manufacturer out of Roxboro, N.C., to develop the company's Champion Super Stretch line, which stretches considerably more than other monofilament — up to 33% compared to 12% for most lines. That means less lip-ripping and more fish in the boat.

"Not only does the Slime Line Champion Super Stretch expand more, it also retreats back to its original length," he said. "Other monofilaments don't shrink back, and most begin to get brittle and weak once they're stretched. This line is a game changer for crappie anglers in the same way today's advanced electronics are for crappie anglers. That extra stretch gives you that little bit of extra time you need to get a net under that fish and get it in the boat." ■



Brian Cope

Slime Line Super Stretch, a monofilament with more stretch than others, is a key to Whitey Outlaw's crappie-fishing arsenal because it helps him have fewer fish tear off before getting in his net.



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Guide Eddie Moody of Roxboro, N.C., tight-lines for crappie in February on Kerr Lake, concentrating on the mouth of creeks on the upper end of the border reservoir.



Eddie Moody

## KERR LAKE CRAPPIE ARE SETTING UP SHOP

Slabs move to mouth of creeks on upper end of border lake to prepare for spawn

**F**ebruary may feel like just another cold month to some anglers, but crappie fishermen know that the subtle changes occurring are stacking the deck in their favor. At Kerr Lake on the North Carolina/Virginia border, slabs will begin to mill around the mouths of creeks that are home to their favorite spawning grounds, and guide Eddie Moody of Roxboro, N.C., will have his rigs ready to take full advantage.

"In February, the water temperature is going to be around 45 degrees, maybe up to 50 on a sunny streak," said Moody (984-363-5256), who owns Slab's Guide Service, "and the crappie will start moving into the mouths of the creeks. A good indicator is when you see the shad moving. The crappie's instincts tell them that the spawn is coming, but they're also following their grocery store."

According to Moody, the best average depth to target crappie in February will be 12 to 16 feet. He said that the earlier portion will likely see some fish as deep as 20 feet, and the latter is subject to see some shallower fish in 7 feet and potentially on the spawning flats if a warming trend persists. Crappie will approach the spawning ground in waves, with the largest fish leading the way. Any temperatures close to 55 or 58 are fair game for the first

spawners, he said.

Areas of interest inside the creek mouths will include the edges of the creek channel itself, along with nearby points that provide a structural relief. Rocks, stumps and any type of wooden cover on these areas such as brush piles are a boon. Moody said that the upper end of the lake — where the water is shallower overall — will fire off first. Creeks, including Buffalo and Bluestone, as well as the headwaters where the Staunton, Dan and Roanoke rivers converge will be hot.

"Generally, tight-lining will dominate, because the fish will be moving slow, and you can dangle a bait in front of their face," Moody said. "Most (anglers) will run a spread of 8 to 10 rods off the bow at a speed of a 1/2-mile an hour down to a dead standstill. Each rod will have a 1/4-ounce weight, 12 to 24 inches of leader and a 1/32- to a 1/64-ounce jighead tipped with a minnow. I'll use 8-pound monofilament mainline and 6-pound leader. Soft-plastic colors range from black and blue, chartreuse, chartreuse and pink, to red for high pressure days. I like the Bobby Garland baits. The Baby Shad style is a good one for tight-lining." ■

— Dusty Wilson



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**STAY CLOSE TO DEEP WATER AND GO WITH BIG LURES FOR FEBRUARY BASS THAT ARE READY TO PUT ON THE FEED BAG IN THE RIGHT SITUATIONS. ■ By Jeff Burleson**

# CHILL OUT WITH **BIG BASS BIG BAIT'S**



# February is the dead of winter across the northern hemisphere.

While it can be super chilly in the Carolinas, stellar fishing opportunities still exist in both freshwater and saltwater environments.

For serious bass fisherman, February is the prime time when many lunkers approaching double digits show up on the radar. And a large-profile lure is kryptonite to those big girls patrolling deep banks hoping for a biggie-sized meal.

No doubt, January and February bring temperature extremes to the Carolinas, but they don't stop the feed. Fish don't just wait for spring to arrive but continue to feed over the winter, whether they're living in North Carolina's High Rock Lake or South Carolina's Santee Cooper lakes.

Pro bass anglers and guides must find feeding bass year-round. They have to figure out where to catch fish, and big fish, no matter what the conditions. Brett Mitchell is one such angler, a tournament fishermen and guide on the Santee Cooper lakes. He likes fishing in February because he typically finds famished, oversized fish in the mood to eat.

"Some of the biggest fish of the year are caught in January and February," said Mitchell (803-379-7029). "We catch a lot of fish from 2 to 10 pounds out of the same spots this time of year."

Even though the water is cold, fish are hungry and are preparing for what is to come over the next few months.

"The bass try to fatten up, because the spring spawn is coming, and it will take a lot out of them," he said.

Bass are predators and will move around throughout the year to places where they can find forage and feed. During the winter, the shallows get the full effect of the cold weather, which drives forage and predator fish into more temperature-stable waters. But they don't have to be the super-deep waters of the middle of the lakes, either. Mitchell uses a strategy much different than he does during the spring, summer and fall.

"Basically, it is the opposite of what you would typically look for in spring (when) you are looking for shallow flats," he said. "In winter, the fish will be abutted to deep banks, bluff banks and creeks with edges with water 5 to 6 feet deep along the bank. And they will not be far from water over 10 feet deep, either."

Baitfish, bass and other predators stay close to deeper water so they can retreat to the warmer, deep areas, because winter fluctuations in air temperatures can cause shallow-water temperatures to plummet into inhospitable ranges.

"Bass get totally focused on the shad during the winter, and they will be holding up along the deeper banks with even deeper water close by," he said.

The deep, bluff banks offer the stability of deep water and available structure that baitfish will use to hide from predators. But bass are voracious predators and eat plenty of shad over the winter, which that makes these places excellent areas for anglers to throw a selection of lures.

According to Mitchell, large bass congregate in these areas and look to feed on larger-sized baits.

"Larger bass typically look for larger forage fish in the winter. They eat bigger fish where they don't have to feed as often," he said.

Smaller bass will not generally travel with larger bass in winter for fear of being eaten. A 12-inch bass can be a juicy meal for a 20-inch largemouth.

Mitchell targets large bass with swimbaits, spinnerbaits, lip-less crankbaits, and other jumbo-sized lures.



Guide Brett Mitchell looks for bass to be well off the banks, on the edges of deeper channels and ditches in 5 to 10 feet of water.



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**BIG BASS, BIG BAITS**

“I don’t need something that goes 30 feet deep. I just look for baits with a larger profile to mimic larger baitfish,” he said.

Mitchell loves big swimbaits because they can be fished slowly. One of his favorites is the Keitech Fat Swing Impact because it has a perfect swimming appearance if retrieved slow or fast. During the winter, he is typically pulling these baits slowly. He will also use lipless baits like Rat-L-Traps and large, lipped crankbaits along these deep banks.

While he prefers deep banks with cover, he will also fish deep brush, and there’s no lack of such on his Santee Cooper lakes or in any other reservoir in the Carolinas, sunk either by state wildlife agencies as fish attractors or by die-hard bass or crappie anglers. These deep brush piles are perfect places to harbor shad, crappie and bluegill and they are ideal places for lunker bass to obtain a deluxe dinner.

When fishing brush, Mitchell uses combines two big lures with plenty of flash and vibration to entice bigger bass into striking.

“Spinnerbaits are wonderful winter lures for brush piles,” he said. “I like to use one with a large, willow-leaf blade with a swimbait as



Bigger baits like this crankbait offer bass the chance for a big meal with a minimum of effort, an important combination in February.

a trailer. It’s a huge profile, but it can be the perfect combination to use on deep brush and places with heavy cover in winter.”

Winter fishing isn’t for everybody, but for big bass, big lures can be the name of the game if fished in the right places.

“I may not get a ton of bites by using these large baits, but you will definitely get the bigger fish when they do,” he said. ■



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



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# TARGET MOVING WATER

Bass fishing in winter can be tough, because the number of bites may not match the spring, but a dedicated angler can put a big stringer of bass together in a small chunk of real estate.

Productive winter spots are not as abundant as areas that hold fish the rest of the year, but some places are notably better, and places that have some moving water can create opportunities for bass to feed and anglers to catch them.

Lakes and reservoirs lack a significant level of moving water, but when it is present, fish will pile into those areas. Brett Mitchell of Fishing With Brett Guide Service takes full advantage of that situation.

"Running water is helpful," Mitchell said. "Fish gang up at chokepoints. The current creates a feeding opportunity."

In most reservoirs, running water is going to be associated with deeper water. Most places with running water are going to be in the river where it enters a lake, at a bottleneck near bridges or some kind of man-made canal system.

Jeff Burleson



Moving water will concentrate bass and baitfish during the winter; fish in areas with current and cover.

Mitchell is in a special situation on his home waters, Lake Marion and Lake Moultrie, which are connected by the 5-mile Diversion Canal.

"Current is easy to find on Santee due to the Diversion Canal, Rediversion Canal, and the two spillways," he said.

The spillway gates are opened daily, which creates current throughout the connective canal system. These areas have current that create numerous chokepoints along the way in deep water.

Mitchell will look for chokepoints with cover and deep water to large, feeding bass in winter conditions. ■

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# BEST TIME FOR BIG BASS

FEBRUARY, EARLY MARCH ARE UNMATCHED FOR CAROLINA LUNKERS

I have long believed that the best time to catch truly big bass — the bass of a lifetime — is before most other fishermen even give it a thought.

In other words, February.

February to mid-March is definitely the best time, here in the Carolinas, to target big fish. You can't beat it. It's a big reason why you need to start fishing late in the winter, before the trees start budding and everything gets going.

They're out there, and they're ready to be caught. But you need to go out with the mindset that you're not fishing for numbers of fish, but taking advantage of the opportunity to catch the fish of a lifetime.

There are several reasons why. In February, big female bass move from the main lake or main river to the mouth of creeks, and they are feeling good. They're full of eggs; they're the biggest they've been all year, and they haven't been pressured. Oh, they see a few lures, but not like they'll see later on.

I think big bass are like big bucks. Big bucks feel pressure during deer season, and when they do, they're less likely to make a mistake. I think it's the same way

with bass. I think a big fish understands that seeing all those different lures, hearing outboard motors running and feeling the ping of our electronics — that's pressure.

Fewer people have been fishing in December and January, and that's a big deal. And the other thing is, these big females are loners, and they're beginning to feed this month, to move up to the places they stage, to think about spawning.

## LONGER DAYS

It's not all about water temperature. That certainly plays a role, but it's really the length of the days, and maybe the moon phase — just like the deer rut. The water temperature may still be in the upper 40s or lower 50s, but those big fish start to move up out of deep water. Mother Nature is calling them in for a lot of reasons. I think bass know that getting up in shallower water helps their eggs mature. That's why it's time to go fishing in the Carolinas.

The first step in getting ready for a trip to target the biggest girls out there is to decide on baits, and you have to use baits that are going to catch big fish.

I am going to have three different baits tied on when I had to the lake in February, whether I'm going to Santee Cooper or Lake Murray or Lake Wylie or Buggs Island. I love to fish a Mop jig; it's a great big-fish bait. I'm going to be fishing a ½- or ⅝-ounce Mop jig in brown, or blue/black if the water is a little dirty. I'll use a Yamamoto Flappin' Hog for a trailer. If the water's clear, it will be watermelon red or green pumpkin; if the water's a little stained, it will be black/blue. Those are my base colors.

This is a big, bulky bait, and I'll fish it on the bottom. If I'm fishing on a high-pressure day, I'm going to be crawling it across the bottom 100% of the time, and I'll definitely be fishing it much slower, because while they're feeding more, they're not chasing yet; the water isn't warm enough for that.



Davy Hite of Ninety Six, S.C. is a two-time BASS Angler of the Year who won the 1999 Bassmasters Classic and 1998 FLW Tour Championship. He is sponsored by Phoenix, Evinrude, Bass Pro Shops, Rapala, Buckeye, VMC, Humminbird, War Eagle and Yamamoto.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** February and early March can't be beat when it comes to the best times to target and catch huge largemouth bass like this one the author caught at Santee Cooper.

## SUSPENDING FISH

Second, I'm going to fish a jerkbait like a Shad Rap Deep in herring or natural shad colors. A jerkbait is a great bait because when you get a low-pressure system coming through, a real nasty day to be on the water, sometimes those fish will suspend, and that's when you catch 'em on a jerkbait.

I wind the bait down to where I want it, then I start my retrieve. In this case, cadence is everything. I slow things down a lot in February. I might give the bait a couple of twitches, then let it sit three or four seconds, then twitch it again. Most other times of year, I won't let it sit still more than a second, but in February, you need it sitting there, still, where the bass can get it without chasing.

The third way I like to fish for really big fish is with a VMC Tokyo rig. Now, I've only learned how to do this in the past year or 18 months, but it's a deadly way to present a big bait to a big fish because it's a vertical presentation. It's sort of like fishing a drop-shot rig, but with a big bait, not a little shaky head worm.

A Tokyo rig is a wire about 4 inches long that attaches to a split ring. You thread the split ring through the eye of a big worm hook — 2/0 or bigger — and your line ties to the split ring, or you can use a barrel swivel on the end of your line. I like to use two tungsten weights on the end of the wire, anywhere from 1/8- to 3/8-ounce weights. I use two smaller sinkers instead of one big one, because they make a lot more when they touch or clang around.

I'll usually fish a creature bait or a big worm like a 7½-inch Yamamoto Kut Tail worm or a Senko on a Toyko rig, because I want that big, bulky bait, but what I really want is that vertical fall you get with a drop-shot rig, and all this is is a beefed-up drop-shot rig. It has a very different fall from a jig or a worm. The weight is below the bait, so it falls vertically. When a jig or worm falls, even though it falls almost vertically, the line still

pulls it down at a little bit of an angle. A vertical fall will trigger a bite from a big fish better.

## SHALLOW/DEEP

Now, where are you going to target these big female bass? Two words: shallow/deep. You want to fish close to deep water, but not in deep water. Both male and female bass are moving up, but males tend to roam and go to the bank more. You're really looking for that first drop, that first good contour break. They want to be shallow, but they're not ready to move up onto a flat yet. When I look at the Lakemaster maps on my Humminbird depth finders, I want a place where the contour lines are close together. If I'm fishing a ditch, I don't want to be up on the flat, but I don't want to be fishing the bottom of the ditch, either. I want a place where there's a difference of at least 10 feet between where my boat is sitting and where I'm casting.

If I'm fishing a section of a creek, I'm going to be looking for those areas where

the drop is steeper, where you have shallower water close to deep water. Those are the kinds of places where bass can move up when the water warms a few degrees and be in places where they can feed.

Here's one other tip. Most of the year, during spring, summer and fall, I think the time right after sunrise and right after sunset are the best times, nine out of 10, to catch a big fish. But not in February or early March. This time of year, when the water is just starting to warm up, the fishing can definitely be better on up into the day, when the sun's had a chance to get on the water and warm it up some. That will really get bigger fish moving.

So, don't spend your time off watching college basketball or puttering around the house. You should already have your tackle ready. Tie on the right kinds of baits, look in the right kinds of areas, and really concentrate on big fish. You might just catch that big one you've been waiting for all these years. ■



### TOKYO RIG:

VMC's Tokyo rig is a beefed-up version of a drop-shot rig that allows you to fish a big, bulky bait with the same vertical presentation that is so productive with a drop-shot.



Terry Madewell

## FEBRUARY'S PROMISE

IT'S WINTER, BUT SPRING FISHING ISN'T FAR AWAY AT SANTEE

**D**espite the winter weather typically associated with February, the trend for improved fishing brings tangible results in February to the Santee Cooper lakes. February usually begins with largemouth bass and crappie in a sluggish "can-be-caught" mode, but by the middle to the end of the month, some early, prespawn movement occurs.

### ADAPT FOR SUCCESS

Largemouth bass action is not red hot early in the month, but it can be an excellent time to hook trophy fish. Stevie Pack at Pack's Landing said that in a typical winter, bass in the upper end of Lake Marion are usually a couple weeks ahead of fish in the lower end of the lake and in Lake Moultrie.

"Bass fishermen do well with bottom-bumping baits by fishing trees and

stumps along the edges of deeper swamp runs as well as in moderate depths in the open water flats around stumps, logs and trees," Pack said. "The bite may not be fast-paced, but is generally consistent."

Working spinnerbaits and crankbaits around wooden and weedy cover is also effective, but the retrieve needs to be slower in the colder water. Also, another tip is to use smaller baits in the upper end of the lake at this time of the year. Big bass are more willing to chow down on smaller baits in February.

"Also, fishing live shiners around wooden cover in February produces some really big bass," he said.

Crappie fishing in the upper end can actually be very good, depending on the severity of the winter and the water temperature, according to Pack (803-452-5514).

"It's not unusual to see some good

results from crappie even in late January and through February," he said. "Crappie can be caught working minnows or jigs around shallow cover adjacent to deeper holes in the upper end of the lake. When a front passes through we may have to back off to fishing brush or other woody cover in 10 to 12 feet deep."

"The trick is to adapt to prevailing conditions in," Pack said. "Water temperature, color and amount of current will dictate where fish are found, but typically, bass and crappie fishing is good and improving in February."



**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.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Guide Brett Mitchell said a variety of lures will produce strikes from largemouth bass in February, as they begin to stir and head to prespawn patterns.

## CHANGING UP

No magical day exists when fishing action begins to morph from winter to early spring patterns. Guide Brett Mitchell said sometime around the middle of February, a positive change occurs.

"I'm on the water a lot, and at some point, a change in the overall trend of bass fishing action occurs in February," he said. "In some years when water conditions are right, we'll have prespawn activity by late in the month, but even without that, more big bass start making moves toward shallower water.

Mitchell (803-379-7029) said one of the keys to success is to be forward-thinking in the cold weather of February.

"We're still usually fishing in cold weather in February, but overall, the trend is usually a slowly warming water temperature, he said. "I certainly fish the 6- to 10-foot depth range where much of the action occurs in January, but I'll also start checking shallower areas as well."

Mitchell said multiple targets hold bass during February, but in and around depressions, wooden cover and rocks are prime targets. February is an overlooked time for big bass.

"Big bass are on the move this month," he said. "Don't let the cold keep you off the water. Bass are prepping for the typical March move into the shallows; they're just staging a bit deeper right now."

Mitchell said the transition to shallower water in February is not usually dramatic unless the area has experienced an unusually warm winter.

"But the overall pattern is moving forward toward the prespawn and spawn, and by occasionally checking areas more typically associated with early March, I begin to pick up a few bass, and they're usually quality fish," he said.

## TROLL FOR PRESPAWN SLABS

Guide Stevie English said when water conditions get right during the early spring, he'll long-line troll for crappie, an often-overlooked tactics on the Santee Cooper lakes.

"With all the cover and standing trees, the options for long-line trolling are limited to some extent, but a number of places do set up well for this tactic," he said.

Conditions must be right, but crappie will get into a prespawn pattern of staging in slightly deeper water before the spawn and some open-water areas such as stump-filled flats, as well as along the edges of drops can be excellent.

English (843-709-8138) will troll multiple rigs with jigs varying in size from 1/64- to 1/8-ounce, usually tipped with a minnow. He experiments with different colors and varies the speed until he finds the right combination. ■



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# TARGET SMALLMOUTH

## as spring approaches on Fontana Lake

**G**uide James McManus of Sylva, N.C., expects smallmouth bass fishing on North Carolina's Fontana Lake to be on the rebound this winter.

"Last winter, we had a fish die-off, and fishing was tough overall," said McManus, of 153 Charters. "I expect a rebound this year, because the lake has received less pressure with the poor fishing last year. Bigger smallies have also been given a little space because of the lower numbers of spotted bass."

McManus (828-421-8125) said February has long been one of his favorite months for big smallmouth bass at Fontana.

"With a warming trend, the fish sense the upcoming spawn, so they are right on the banks," McManus said.

Any baits cast into the shallows should get some attention from smallmouth. Productive offerings include Flicker Shads, Shad Raps, small Zoom Flukes and X-Raps. The latter two are deadly in ghost and silver sparkle colors. Other options are natural-colored, do-nothing worms in smaller sizes and jig/fluke combinations.

McManus said if the weather turns cold, slower retrieves should draw action.

Smallies can be found all over 10,230-acre Fontana, along with white bass and spotted bass. Mixed bags of fish are commonplace.

McManus said fishermen primarily targeting smallmouth bass should fish the stretch from the Point 5 area downstream. He suggests trying points right off the main channel and places just inside the creek mouths. Hazel, Eagle and Pilkey creeks are productive places, along with any indentations along the main channel.

"This area not only gives you a better chance of catching more smallies than spotted bass, but it also receives less pressure," said McManus, who focuses upon chunk-rock banks early in the month, then gravel and mixed rock banks as March approaches.

Some of the most-explosive fishing can take place in open water where smallies occasionally form fairly large schools in 30 to 60 feet of water. Surface action is always a possibility, so have a rod and lure ready that can make long casts.

Most of the fishing for smallmouths involves light spinning gear, whether casting or trolling. Casting dominates when the fish are shallow; trolling is favored when the fish move deep.

McManus encourages fishermen to release the smallies and harvest the spots, which are prolific.

"The spots are better eating anyway," he said. "We need to protect our native smallmouth bass." ■

— Tony Garitta



James McManus

Work Fontana Lake's chunk-rock banks for smallmouth bass early in February, then target banks with gravel or mixed rocks later in the month.



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Dearal Rogers catches Lake Wateree bass this month as they move up out of deep water and prepare for the prespawn.



# WATEREE BASS MOVE

## out of deep water, to staging areas

**F**ebruary is a month of change: cold one day, warming the next. Spring-like temperatures can be followed quickly by snow, ice or freezing rain. But fishermen still go fishing and fish still bite — if you know how to catch them in varying conditions.

Female bass in South Carolina's Lake Wateree, triggered by longer days of sunlight and increasing periods of warming temperatures, prepare to spawn and start staging on points in aquatic grass and on rock piles, according to veteran angler Dearal Rodgers of Camden, S.C.

"The females feed in groups in early February, so I am on the lookout for multiple bites in one area," Rodgers said. "If water conditions are favorable — with a warming trend and stained but not muddy water at a normal lake level — I like to use moving baits around rocks. Good lures for me

include crawdad-colored No. 5, 7 or 8 Shad Raps and crawdad-colored ½- and ¾-ounce Rat-L-Traps. For grass, I like a white ¾-ounce spinnerbait with gold blades, and a white swim jig."

If water conditions are less favorable, he said, such as a cold front moving in, cooling water, high or muddy water, he likes to slow down in the rocks and use a Buckeye Mop jig or Spot Remover shaky head on the bottom, and a Shad Rap will still get a few bites.

"For grass, I'm flipping a craw or worm on a ¼-ounce to ½-ounce weight," he said.

"As the weather continues a warming trend towards the end of the month, I start fishing back in the coves, looking for male and female cruising fish. I like to target these fish with a green pumpkin Mop jig on the warm days and the Spot Remover shaky head on the tough days."

While any cover on the bank is a good target in late February some of the best cover is provided by the many docks on Lake Wateree, according to Rodgers. ■

— Pat Robertson

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**HUNTING SEASONS**

**DEER**

Region	Method	Season Dates	
Western	Bowhunting	Sept. 7-29	
		Oct. 13-Nov. 24	
		Dec. 15-Jan. 1, 2020 (bucks only)	
Northwestern	Bowhunting	Sept. 7-Nov. 8	
		Muzzleloader	Sept. 30-Oct. 13
		Gun	Nov. 25-Dec. 14
Central	Bowhunting	Sept. 7-Nov. 8	
		Muzzleloader	Nov. 9-22
		Gun	Nov. 23-Jan. 1, 2020
Northeastern/ Southeastern	Bowhunting	Sept. 7-Nov. 1	
		Muzzleloader	Nov. 2-15
		Gun	Nov. 16-Jan. 1, 2020
Northeastern/ Southeastern	Bowhunting	Sept. 7-27	
		Muzzleloader	Sept. 28-Oct. 11
		Gun	Oct. 12-Jan. 1, 2020

**BEAR**

<b>Oct. 14-Nov. 23 &amp; Dec. 16-Jan. 1, 2020:</b>	In and west of Surry, Wilkes, Caldwell, Burke and Cleveland counties
<b>Nov. 16-Jan. 1, 2020:</b>	Alamance, Anson, Cabarrus, Caswell, Chatham, Davidson, Durham, Granville, Guilford, Lee, Mecklenburg, Montgomery, Orange, Person, Randolph, Rockingham, Rowan, Stanly, Union counties
<b>Oct. 12-Jan. 1, 2020:</b>	Franklin, Harnett, Hoke, Johnston, Moore, Richmond, Scotland, Vance, Warren, Wake counties
<b>Nov. 23-Jan. 1, 2020:</b>	Alexander, Catawba, Davie, Forsyth, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Stokes, Yadkin counties
<b>Nov. 11-Jan. 1, 2020:</b>	Bladen, Brunswick, Carteret, Columbus, Cumberland, Duplin, New Hanover, Onslow, Pamlico, Pender, Robeson, Sampson counties
<b>Nov. 9-24, Dec. 14-29:</b>	Dare, Hyde, Tyrrell counties
<b>Nov. 9-17, Dec. 14-29:</b>	Beaufort, Bertie, Craven, Currituck, Gates, Hertford, Jones, Martin, Perquimans, Washington counties
<b>Nov. 8-17, Dec. 14-29:</b>	Camden, Chowan, Pasquotank counties
<b>Nov. 17-Dec. 15:</b>	Edgecombe, Greene, Halifax, Lenoir, Nash, Northampton, Pitt, Wayne, Wilson counties
<b>Nov. 11-Jan. 1, 2020:</b>	Edgecombe, Bladen, Carteret, Columbus, Cumberland, Duplin, New Hanover, Onslow, Pamlico, Pender, Roberson, Sampson counties

**SQUIRREL**

<b>SQUIRREL</b>	Oct. 14-Feb. 29, 2020 (gray & red)
	Oct. 14-Jan. 31, 2020 (fox) 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**

<b>RABBIT</b>	Oct. 14-Feb. 28, 2020
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**RACCOON, OPOSSUM**

<b>RACCOON, OPOSSUM</b>	Oct. 14-Feb. 29, 2020
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**QUAIL**

<b>QUAIL</b>	Nov. 23, 2019-Feb. 29, 2020
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**GROUSE**

<b>GROUSE</b>	Oct. 14-Feb. 29, 2020
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**RAILS**

<b>RAILS</b> (KING, SORA, VIRGINIA, CLAPPER) (GALLINULES, MOORHENS)	Sept. 7-Nov. 27 Sept. 7-Nov. 27
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**CANADA GEESE**

<b>CANADA GEESE</b>	Resident zone, Oct. 2-12, Nov. 16-Dec. 7, Dec. 14-Feb. 8, Statewide: Sept. 2-30; NE Zone, Jan. 16-31, permit only
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**SNOW, BLUE, ROSS GEESE**

<b>SNOW, BLUE, ROSS GEESE</b>	Oct. 8-Feb. 8, 2020, Feb. 10-March 31, 2020 (permit)
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**DUCKS**

<b>DUCKS</b>	Oct. 3-5, Nov. 16-Dec. 2 Dec. 14-Jan. 31, 2020
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**EARLY TEAL**

<b>EARLY TEAL</b>	Sept. 12-30 (east of US 17 only)
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**SEA DUCKS**

<b>SEA DUCKS</b>	Nov. 23-Jan. 31, 2020
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**BRANT**

<b>BRANT</b>	Dec. 28-Jan. 31, 2020
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**DOVE**

<b>DOVE</b>	Sept. 2-Oct. 5, Nov. 16-30, Dec. 9-Jan. 31, 2020
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**TUNDRA SWAN**

<b>TUNDRA SWAN</b>	Nov. 9-Jan. 31, 2020. Bag limit 1, by permit only.
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**WOODCOCK**

<b>WOODCOCK</b>	Dec. 7-Jan. 28, 2020
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**HUNTING SEASONS**

SPECIES	SEASON DATES (PRIVATE LAND)	BAG LIMIT	POSSESSION LIMIT
<b>Doves</b>	Sept. 2-7, Sept. 8-Oct. 12 Nov. 16-30, Dec. 28-Jan. 30, 2020	15	45
<b>Crow</b>	Nov. 1-March 1, 2020	No limits	
<b>Quail</b>	Nov. 20-March 1, 2020	12	36
<b>Rabbit</b>	Nov. 23-March 1, 2020	5	15
<b>Squirrel</b>	Oct. 1-March 1, 2020	10	30
<b>Fox</b>	Nov. 23-March 1, 2020	No limits	
<b>Grouse</b>	Nov. 23-March 1, 2020 (Game Zone 1 only)	3	9
<b>Raccoon</b>	Sept. 15-March 15, 2020 (statewide)	3 raccoons per party	
<b>Opossum</b>	Sept. 15-March 15, 2020 (Game Zones 3, 6)	No limits	
<b>Other furbearers</b>	Nov. 26-March 1, 2020 (bobcat, otter, weasel, mink, muskrat, skunk)	No limits	
<b>Bear</b>	Oct. 17-23 (still hunting only) (Game Zone 1 only) Oct. 24-30 (dogs), (Game Zone 1 only) Oct. 17-30 (Horry, Georgetown, Marion, Williamsburg counties) (permit only)	1  5 per party	
<b>Rails</b>	Sept. 27-Oct. 2, King & Clapper Sora & Virginia Gallinules (common/purple)	15 25 15	45 75 45
<b>Snipe</b>	Nov. 14 - Feb. 28, 2020	8	24
<b>Woodcock</b>	Dec. 18 - Jan. 31, 2020	3	9
<b>Wild Turkey</b>	March 22-April 30, 2020 (Game Zones 3&4) April 1-May 10, 2020 (Game Zones 1&2)	3 3	

**DEER SEASON**

ZONE	ARCHERY	PRIM WEAPON	GUNS
<b>1</b>		Oct. 1-10	Oct. 11-Jan. 1, 2020
<b>2</b>	Sept. 15-30	Oct. 1-10	Oct. 11-Jan. 1, 2020
<b>3</b>			Aug. 15-Jan. 1, 2020
<b>4</b>	Aug 15-31		Sept. 1-Jan. 1, 2020
<b>Youth Day</b>			Jan. 6, 2020

**WATERFOWL SEASONS**

SPECIES	DATES	BAG LIMIT
<b>Duck</b>	Teal only: Sept. 13-28 Nov. 23-30, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2020	6 6
<b>Canada geese</b>	Sept. 1-30, Nov. 23-30, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2020, Feb. 14-29, 2020	15
<b>Blue/snow (light) geese</b>	Nov. 23-30, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2020, Feb. 14-29, 2020	25
<b>Brant</b>	Jan. 2-31, 2020	2
<b>Sea ducks</b>	Nov. 23-30, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2020	6
<b>Mergansers</b>	Nov. 23-30, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2020	5 (1 hooded)
<b>Coots</b>	Nov. 23-30, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2020	15



Beaches along North Carolina's central coast fill with huge schools of redfish in cold months. Use these lessons for plenty of action.

# TURN THE SURF RED

BY JERRY DILSAVER

**T**he ride from Wrightsville Beach to Rich Inlet was cold, but that was expected. Once there, Stu Caulder slowed to near idle to make his way through the shallow, unmarked path to the ocean that features shifting sands and a blockade runner wreck. Proceeding with caution is the only way to proceed.

Idling through the inlet, Caulder, who runs Gold Leader Guide Service, searched the sandbars and shallow sloughs on each side for a dark or reddish tinted spot that would indicate a school of redfish. By the end of the winter, reds will be a rich, copper color, but a school would still probably look only like a shadow in the water unless lifted up in a swell.

Shortly, Caulder spotted a dark area, but he couldn't go directly to it because of sand bars between the sloughs. He continued to idle toward casting range to keep from spooking the shallow fish. He passed out spinning outfits with DOA C.A.L. plastics threaded on  $\frac{3}{8}$ -ounce jigheads tied on with loop knots.





Jerry Dilsaver

## Unfortunately, a school of bottlenose dolphins also spotted the reds and moved in, turning predators into prey.

“From all the TV shows, people think Flipper is your friend,” Caulder said. “He may be if you’re swimming or something like that, but he’s not when you’re fishing for drum and trout. Both are high on their preferred foods list, and they can put a hurting on a school quickly. What they don’t eat, they scare away. You saw how fast those drum disappeared.”

Caulder moved up the beach along Lea Island, and about halfway up, roughly where an old inlet used to separate Lea and Hutaff islands, the water changed from clear to murky, and he turned around. He didn’t spot any drum before reaching Rich Inlet, and the pod of hungry dolphin were still patrolling it.

“There were a couple of schools around Mason Inlet earlier in the week, so we’re heading there,” Caulder said. “We’ll run along the beach barely on plane and look for a school, but I don’t think we’ll see any until we get real close to the inlet. We’ve got to get away from these dolphin. They scattered that one school and probably spooked any others close by.”

There were no drum along the Figure Eight Island beach, but Caulder spotted a shadow between a couple of bars in Mason Inlet.

Once in casting range, his anglers lobbed soft plastics to the dark spot in the water. Caulder was coaching them not to move the lures too quickly when his rod bent and began pulsing. The red sped across a shallow bar to the slough on the other side and played tug of war until tiring enough that he could lead it to the landing net.



Jerry Dilsaver

**TOP:** Plenty of action on winter drum will be in the ocean, most of the time, almost within a long cast from the beach, just beyond the breakers. **ABOVE:** Red drum are regularly caught in the winter from upper-slot to over-slot sizes.

Anglers can catch multiple fish from a school, but the action will end, at least momentarily when fish are spooked.

The fleeing drum startled the school, and fish ran in many directions. Once the hooked drum was released, Caulder positioned the boat close to where the school had been feeding, hoping they would return. The drum slowly returned, and Caulder's crew caught several, but the fishing ended when the drum were spooked and the school didn't reform.

Caulder said many factors affect schools of drum along the beach. Dolphin are just one, and about the only thing fishermen can do is move away from them — at least a couple of miles. Weather is also a big factor. Temperatures can be near freezing for several days and then warm to 70 overnight. Sunny days warm the water, and baitfish may move back inside the inlets — and the redfish follow. However, fish don't show well on cloudy days, and sunny days are necessary to see them in the water. Onshore winds are bad, too, as they create waves and stir up the water.

"This is fun fishing when you find a school of hungry redfish



Jerry Dilsaver

## NATURAL VS. RENOURISHED BEACHES

Renourishing beaches after hurricanes and other erosion have become prevalent in inhabited areas along North Carolina's coast. The beaches and islands that aren't developed are left to erode and shift as the forces of nature dictate.

This may provide insight into why more fish, especially red drum, are found off underdeveloped beaches. For years, it was thought lights after dark spooked them, but more anglers believe renourishment projects are the primary cause.

Renourishment projects save beaches and beach homes but give beaches an unnatural texture. The sand packs harder

and it is more difficult for animals like mole crabs to dig their burrows and small shellfish and clams to get a foothold, so they move to an area with softer sand — natural beaches. Harder sand also makes it difficult for fish like drum, whiting, and more to feed.

Renourishment projects require moving sand from somewhere to the beaches, and the sand is usually gathered just offshore or from nearby inlets. The dredging process removes sand fleas, sand dollars and other crustaceans and re-deposits them elsewhere. They rarely survive the dredging process.

Dr. Fred Scharf of UNC-Wilmington said field studies show mole crabs and other crustaceans are more prevalent on natural beaches. One of nature's simple premises is that fish and animals live near their food, and if the food is gone, they move. Scharf said that over time, renourished beaches will return to a near-natural state, and fish and animals often return.

Guide Stu Caulder said he occasionally finds schools of redfish along developed beaches and when he does, they are usually close to the inlets. Far more often, reds prefer natural beaches with bare dunes. ■

that haven't been spooked by dolphins," he said. "All you have to do is cast into the school and twitch the rod tip to make the lure wiggle and vibrate. It doesn't have to move much. The drum are in full-on feeding mode, and they'll find it if you get it close. They fight good too. They won't be as wild as when the water is warmer, but they use the waves and typically fight pretty strong in the surf."

Caulder said drum begin to show in the surf as the water cools in the fall and will be there until it warms in the spring. He said they typically school tighter and in larger schools when the water and air is coolest in January and February. They are easiest to locate when the sun is out and the wind is light from the west. They tend to be lighter in color when the water is

warmer and the schools more spread out, then darken as the water cools and the schools tighten.

Spotting schools, working to within casting range and then catching them combines stalking from hunting, with fishing. When a school is spotted and dolphins don't break up the party, they often bite long and hard enough to tire fishermen. It's a fun experience on a bright, sunny, winter day. ■

**REDS IN THE SUDS**  
CONTINUED ON 54 ▶



**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.



## DESTINATION INFORMATION

**HOW TO GET THERE** — Wilmington is the jumping-off point for anglers looking to fish for winter reds from boats in the surf. I-40, US 74/76 and US 421 are the main highways of access. Carolina Beach, Masonboro, Mason and Topsail are marked inlets leading to the ocean; many locals use Rich Inlet, which is not marked and not considered navigable, even by small boats on calm days. Barrier islands are (south to north): Carolina Beach, Masonboro, Wrightsville Beach, Figure Eight Island, Lea-Hutaff Island, Topsail Beach. Public ramps are on the ICW at Carolina Beach, Wrightsville Beach, Hampstead and Surf City.

**WHEN TO GO** — Reds can be caught in the surf year-round, but the biggest numbers are in the fall and winter when fish move out of inside waters and head for the ocean. A day with offshore (west or northwest) winds or no wind and a small swell is perfect for catching reds in the surf.

**TACKLE/TECHNIQUES** — Use medium-light to medium-action baitcasting, spinning or fly tackle. Rods should be 6½ to 7½ feet, with 2000 to 3000 class spinning reels spooled with 10- to 17-pound mono and a 1- to 2-foot fluorocarbon leader. A variety of baits and lures will work, including soft plastics, hard plastics and gold spoons, plus chunks of menhaden or mullet. Go with a slightly heavier jighead to help with casting distance and to help hold the bait in place on the bottom.

**FISHING INFO/GUIDES** — Capt. Stu Caulder, Gold Leader Fishing, 910-264-2674; Tex's Tackle and Bait, Wilmington, 910-791-1763, [www.texstackle.com](http://www.texstackle.com); Island Tackle and Hardware, Carolina Beach, 910-458-3049, [www.islandtacklehardware.com](http://www.islandtacklehardware.com); Intracoastal Angler, Wilmington, 910-392-3500, [www.intracoastalangler.com](http://www.intracoastalangler.com); Eastern Outfitters, Hampstead, 910-270-2823, [www.easternoutfitter.com](http://www.easternoutfitter.com); East Coast Sports, Surf City, 910-328-1887, [www.eastcoast-sports.com](http://www.eastcoast-sports.com). See also Guides & Charters in Classifieds.

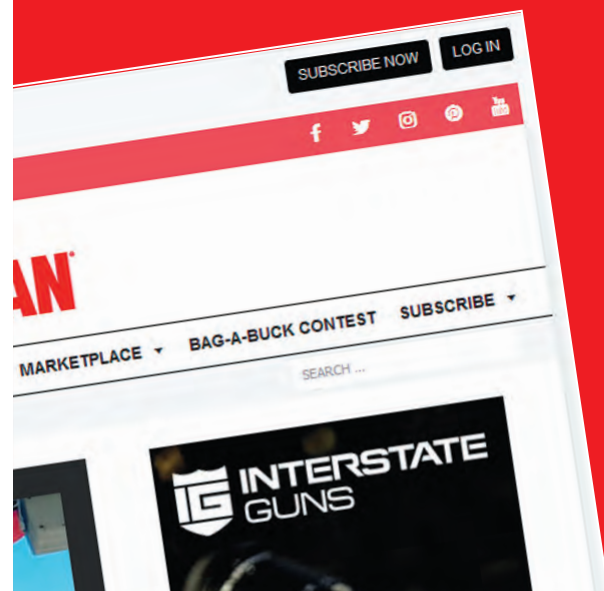
**ACCOMMODATIONS** — MainStay Suites, Wilmington, 910-392-1741, [www.mainstaywilmingtonnc.com](http://www.mainstaywilmingtonnc.com) and Sleep Inn, Wilmington, 910-313-6665, [www.sleepinwilmingtonnc.com](http://www.sleepinwilmingtonnc.com); Cape Fear Convention and Visitors Bureau, Wilmington, 877-406-2356, at [www.cape-fear.nc.us](http://www.cape-fear.nc.us).

**MAPS** — Capt. Segull's Nautical Charts, 888-473-4855, [www.captainsegullcharts.com](http://www.captainsegullcharts.com); Sealake Fishing Guides, 800-411-0185, [www.thegoodspots.com](http://www.thegoodspots.com); Maps Unique, 910-458-9923, [www.mapsunique.com](http://www.mapsunique.com); Grease Chart, 800-326-3567, [www.greasechart.com](http://www.greasechart.com), GMCO's Chartbook of North Carolina, 888-420-6277, [www.gmcomaps.com](http://www.gmcomaps.com).

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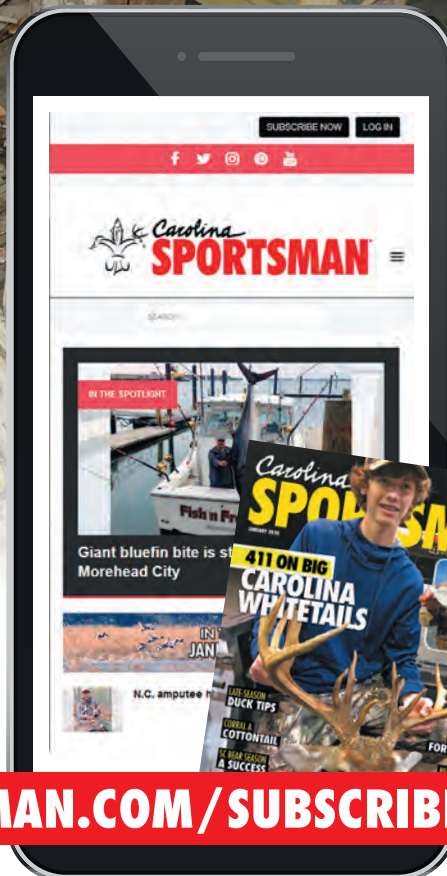
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Turn the surf red



# REDS IN THE SUDS

Red drum tend to gather in schools in the surf and around inlets once the water begins cooling late in the fall. As long as the food holds out, they may stay in the same general area for weeks, maybe months.

Some schools are smaller, maybe a hundred fish or so, but others may approach 1,000 fish, typically a mixture of upper-slot to slightly over-slot fish, reds ranging from 3 to 4 years old.

Lee Paramore, the lead red drum biologist for the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries, said red drum prefer some beaches and inlets, and most of these are places that haven't been developed.

The southern beaches known for holding drum are Lea-Hutaff islands, Figure Eight Island, Topsail Beach and Emerald Isle. The east beach of Bald Head Island, Fort Fisher State Recreation Area and Masonboro Island also hold schools of red drum at times, but rarely the huge schools in other areas.

Bottlenose dolphin prey heavily on redfish during the winter; reds will clear out of an area if dolphin show up.

Paramore said that schooling is a feeding behavior, a way to deter predators, and typically, the water right along ocean beaches is a little warmer than the open water inside the inlets, and it holds more food.

Drum of this size don't have many predators; other than fishermen, the two worst are sharks and dolphins/porpoises. Sharks tend to stay in deeper water but occasionally will venture close to the beaches.

Bottlenose dolphins are a major predator, and the shallow surf and inlet sloughs offer protection from marauding dolphins.

Paramore said schooling in the surf and inlets makes red drum a good target for fishermen. There isn't a bunch of food around in the winter, and drum become even more-opportunistic feeders than at other times.

The surf confuses baitfish and stirs up the bottom, sometimes revealing crabs, worms and shrimp. With their low-slung mouths, drum can grub crabs and worms



Jerry Dilsaver

out of the bottom before they get too deep. They are also less picky about lures and will hit lures they may pass up when food is plentiful. ■

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ARE PRIME TIME TO  
TAKE OUT SOME  
WILD HOGS.**

# HOGS AFTER DARK

■ By Terry Madewell

Terry Madewell

## For a gregarious, gorge-eating animal, a wild pig can be absurdly hard to kill during daylight hours.

With a sense of smell superior to deer and a skittish sense of fear betraying their nasty demeanor, wild pigs are supreme survivalists.

That's evidenced by extreme population explosions in the right habitats across the Carolinas. Daytime hunting can be successful when hunting pressure is low, food sources specific and patient hunters play the wind perfectly.

But it's still often low-light conditions when pigs make an appearance.

Hog-hunting experts agree that nocturnal hours are prime-time for pigs, and generally, when the darkness falls, the pigs do what pigs do best: eat.

Jim Boone owner of Red Bluff Hunting Lodge in Allendale County, S.C., said in the 20 years he's operated his deer- and turkey-hunting operation, hunting pigs has morphed from removal as a nuisance animal to operating a full-scale, 24-hours-a-day commercial pig-hunting operation as well.

"During the past 10 years, we've developed techniques for hunting pigs day and night," Boone said. "I've tracked the data by effort and success rates, and it's a no-brainer. Pigs are much more active and successfully hunted at night."

Boone has parlayed his Clemson degree in wildlife, fisheries and aquaculture into a successful management tool for his hunting operation. He tracks every species on every hunt and has hard computer data to support his hunting philosophy for each species.

"Bottom line is, if someone is serious about hunting hogs, nighttime is **THE** time to go," he said.

Boone has gone all-in for night hunting, purchasing equipment from basic to advanced technology to match the skill, interest and physical ability of clients.

"Much of our property borders the Savannah River, and we have a tremendous population of pigs because of ideal habitat," he said. "I've tracked our harvest for 20 years, and we've



The use of lights, from basic green to thermal-imaging, is used to improved success on hogs after dark.

Terry Madewell

taken thousands of hogs, but our harvest per square mile rate is the same now as when we started 20 years ago. These animals reproduce at an amazing rate, because we're killing them at a high rate."

Terry Hiers at Blackwater Hunting Lodge near Ulmer, S.C., is expanding his hunting operation to include hog hunting at night as well.

"We started with just daytime hog hunts, but with the high hog population and increased interest of hunters, we've expanded," said Hiers (803-671-4868), who believes that not only are pigs significantly more active at night, the larger trophy animals are especially nocturnal. His hunting opportunities are structured around hunters bringing their own equipment; he tailors a plan for the hunt based on the hunter's goals and equipment.

"Even with a high pig population, hunting at night doesn't guarantee success," he said. "A structured plan is essential, and playing the wind right, hunting food sources and keep hunting pressure reasonable by rotating stands being hunted are essential."

Boone agrees, saying hogs are undervalued by many hunters as a worthy adversary.

"Wild hogs are incredibly adaptive and have a much-stronger sense of smell than a deer," he said. "That's the No. 1 thing

for a hog hunter to know in terms of hunting tactics."

Hiers and Boone said hogs need a reason to return to a specific spot, and potential attractors may include natural food, agricultural crop fields or, in most cases, bait such as corn — a hog's weak link to survival. Also scouting and hunting travel routes can be effective. An elevated stand or ground blind will work, and even stalking with the wind in your face with the right equipment can be successful.

But the food source must be consistent to continue attracting hogs.

"Most commercial operations use corn, and the corn supply at a given stand must never run out," Boone said. "I keep feeders going year-round on my hog-hunting stands."

Hogs are taken with a variety of weapons, and most weapons effective on whitetails work well on hogs.

Boone said different levels of night-hog hunting equipment are available, and as is the case with most hunting accessories, you get what you pay for.

Boone (803-300-1179) employs three different levels of equipment based on the needs for a specific hunt. Based on the goals and capabilities of the hunter, he has equipment available from low- to high-end technology.



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**"At** the low end of the technology and cost scale is

a conventional scope with a lighted reticle," he said. "For this equipment, I use a motion-sensing light at the food source to enhance the view of the hog being targeted. The scope and light should be about \$1,000 or less and do a good job. The lighted reticle is essential, because an unlighted reticle gives only dark crosshairs on a dark target at night, even when lit up, making precise targeting difficult at best. Proper shot placement is critical for a quick kill."

An option Boone doesn't employ but is available to hunters is the use of a green or red light attached to the scope as the sole light source. He said if hunters opt for this accessory, a lighted reticle is still essential for proper shot placement.

Boone said regular "night vision" equipment is the next level of technology; it employs ambient light and/or the assistance of short-wave infrared light to boost the productivity of the device.

"It's strictly based on having light available to see the target," he said. "The advanced equipment is thermal imaging. Thermal imaging uses the heat signature from an animal to produce a picture, and this technology detects even small differences in heat, creating a well-defined image."

Boone said thermal-imaging technology has doubled the capabilities for the same cost in recent years, making them twice as effective for the same cost.

"It's a good time to get into nocturnal hog hunting based on equipment and technology advances in recent years," he said. "Someone with a plenty of hogs to hunt would be wise to consider the more advanced technology."

"With sound research, you do get what you pay for, and top-end thermal equipment can have sharp images with 10-power or greater magnification for example, making longer shots a viable option. It's more expensive, but the images are magnificent."

Boone said he's learned about and purchased his night-vision equipment is [www.nightvisionguys.com](http://www.nightvisionguys.com). The site has a wide range of equipment and provides access to detailed information on the products and how they work.

Jim Boone at Red Bluff Lodge said his clients hunt food sources such as corn, with motion-sensing lights to take hogs at night.



Jim Boone

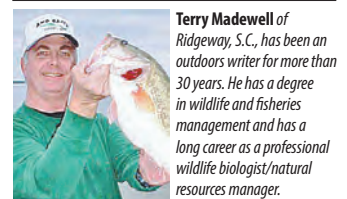
"Knowledge is power in this sport, and I strongly recommend hunters learn the differences in a product's capability before purchasing to ensure it meets their individual needs," he said.

When hunting hogs at night, Boone provides hunters a "hand's-on" opportunity to the different equipment he uses and explains the capabilities of each.

"If they're interested in getting their own equipment, most hunters leave understanding the options available," he said.

Tailor your nocturnal hog hunting to the basic hunting and strategy principles noted by Hiers and Boone for excellent success. Obtain the hunting equipment that favors your hunting land profile and harvest goals and your nocturnal hog hunting success will likely be successful and enjoyable.

As a final safety note, hunting hogs at night even with advanced equipment still requires hunters to identify the target before taking a shot. ■



**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.

## NIGHT HOG-HUNTING REGS DIFFER BETWEEN STATES

Hunting feral hogs at night in the Carolinas is a year-round opportunity on private lands with only a few restrictions. A hunting license is required for the state you're hunting, but no closed season or harvest limit exists on private land in either. The use of bait, electronic calls and night-vision equipment is legal on private lands, and permissible weapons include any legal firearm, bow and arrow or crossbow.

Charles Ruth, big game program coordinator for the S.C. Department of Natural Resources said nocturnal hog hunting in South Carolina must be on property registered with the SCDNR on which a person has a lawful right to hunt. Private property may be registered online for nocturnal hog hunting on the SCDNR website, [www.dnr.sc.gov/nighthunt](http://www.dnr.sc.gov/nighthunt). The property must be registered annually.

No night hog hunting is allowed on Wildlife Management Areas in South Carolina.

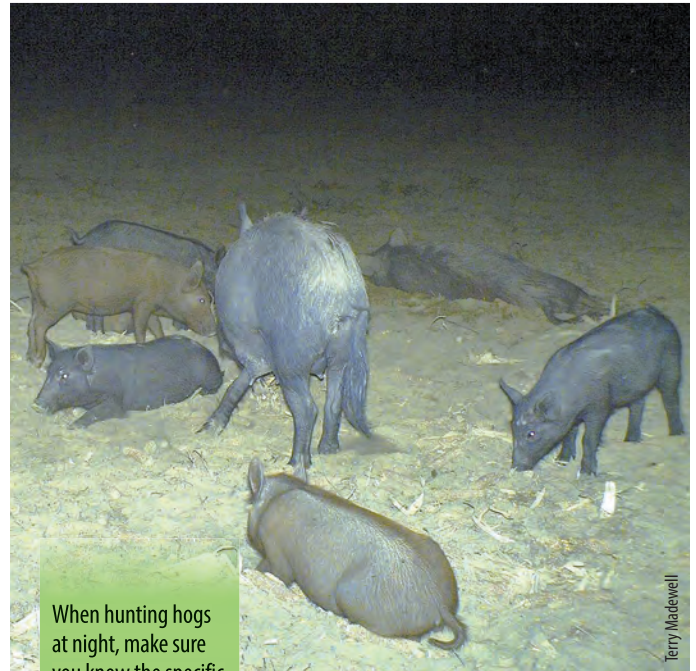
Jason Allen, a biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, said hunting hogs at night in North Carolina is legal on private lands where hunters have legal access to hunt.

"The property does not have to be registered," Allen said. "Also, hunting feral swine at night on public game lands is by special permit only. Permits must be applied for and are issued through a draw process."

For details on draw hunts in North Carolina visit [www.ncwildlife.org/Licensing/Permit-Hunting-Opportunities](http://www.ncwildlife.org/Licensing/Permit-Hunting-Opportunities) and read the coyote and feral hog hunt information under "Hunt Opportunities" for complete details of fees, dates and specific hunting regulations.

Allen said more information on feral hogs and hunting them is available on their website at [www.ncwildlife.org/Learning/Species/Mammals/Feral-Swine#49391755-overview](http://www.ncwildlife.org/Learning/Species/Mammals/Feral-Swine#49391755-overview).

Since regulations differ between the states, hunters need to read and understand nocturnal hog hunting regulations in the state being hunted. ■



When hunting hogs at night, make sure you know the specific regulations for the state in which you are hunting.

Terry Madewell

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# WINTER'S SAVING GRACE

SHEEPSHEAD GIVE CAROLINA ANGLERS A TASTY TARGET IN FEBRUARY

Brian Cope

**F**ebruary can be a brutal month for anglers in the Carolinas, but one fish that is available year-round and bites well during cold weather is sheephead. They are in our inshore waters as well as around near-shore and offshore reefs this time of year.

Sheepshead have saved many a winter's day of fishing. Redfish are schooled up by the hundreds in February, but dolphins keep them wary. Speckled trout head to deeper holes and often refuse bait or lures placed in their faces. But dangle a fiddler crab or a piece of oyster in front of a sheephead, and that bait is going to get gobbled up.

"I really like fishing for sheephead this time of year because I concentrate more on them," said John Long of East Columbia (S.C.) Sport Shop, who has a part-time residence on South Carolina's St. Helena Island. "In the spring, summer, and fall, I think most anglers try to do too much. They want to catch redfish, speckled trout, black drum and sheephead. I know I'm guilty of it. But to get serious about sheephead, you've got to fish specifically for them. It's a different technique than all the others."

Long spends most of his February fishing time in the inshore waters near Beaufort, S.C. Like areas all along the coasts of both Carolinas, the waters are full of wooden docks with pilings, rock walls, wooden walls, bridge pilings, culverts, jetties and groins. Sheephead stack up on these types of structure.

With the Lowcountry's big tidal swings, Long has also found numerous sheephead locales that are not evident at high tide.

"If you spend enough time just riding around and looking at low tide, you'll find spots with sunken cinder blocks and other debris that attract sheephead," he said. "Even structure that doesn't sit high off the bottom will attract them."

## CAROLINA RIGS

Long catches sheephead with a simple Carolina rig, fishing vertically above or beside structure. He prefers a stiff rod for driving the hook home.

"You don't want any slack in the line," he said. "You want to maintain constant contact with your bait. They bite quickly, and if you don't set the hook immediately, you'll miss it every time."

While Long prefers fiddler crabs as his primary sheephead bait most of the year, he often uses the meat from clams or oysters in the winter. Fiddler crabs are usually tough to find in February. He said the few he sometimes sees are not worth the bother of stomping through the mud.

"One of the best fishing tools you can have with you this time of year is a good set of channel lock pliers. They make it easy to break open clams and oysters to get the meat out. That meat makes some great sheephead bait," he said.

## TIGHT-LINE OPTION

While many other sheephead anglers prefer to keep their lines tight the way Long does, it's not the only method. Stacy Atkinson, host of *Low Country Wildlife TV*, learned a different tactic while filming one of his shows.

"It's a brilliant technique, but I can't



**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.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Cold weather is no problem for Capt. Ben Powers when he targets sheepshead.

take credit for it. I learned it from a guest on one of my shows," he said. "Instead of keeping the line tight, you put a fiddler crab on with a very light weight. You toss it into the rocks or other structure, and you let the crab find his own spot to rest. Then you leave enough slack in the line that the crab looks natural. And when a sheepshead grabs it, the line will come tight, and you'll know to set the hook."

When using this method, Atkinson said it's important to hook the fiddler crab without killing it. He suggests running a No. 4, wide-gap hook into one of the crab's back legs and leaving the barb inside. That does as little damage to the crab as possible, allows it to stay alive, and keeps the barb from getting hung in debris.

Atkinson said boat control is very important when fishing this way. With waves, wind and current constantly pushing the boat, anglers can find themselves in trouble real fast.

"When you're fishing like this, and so close to a rock jetty, you really need to have one person on the boat doing nothing but manning the trolling motor to keep the boat off the rocks," he said. ■

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## GREENER PASTURES

Jeff Burleson

A disk harrow and front-end loader are tractor attachments that most landowners cannot do without.



# SOME IMPLEMENTS ARE NECESSITIES

Donna Brookshire

## FOR FARMING OR FOOD-PLOTTING, HOOK THESE ON

**R**ural properties contain roads, fields, ditches and all kinds of other features that become weathered over time and need attention. And hunters can't always maintain shooting lanes, food plots, and trails with hand tools. Let's face it every landowner needs to invest in some heavy equipment.

Of course, landowners don't need to take out a second mortgage on their house to buy the largest tractor and every implement made in the universe. A small tractor with a few versatile implements will make small jobs relatively painless and maybe even a little fun.

Tractor manufacturers sell implements for everything. While all have valid duties, owners of small pieces of land that aren't

using the equipment for business can get away with just a few implements.

### FRONT-END LOADER

One of the most-usable implements that many landowners don't consider is a front-end loader, which can be used for a wide variety of applications, from moving fallen trees, removing debris, scraping roads, creating drainage, removing stumps, creating small watering holes, clearing and some mild construction tasks where heavy lifting is required.

A front-end loader attachment is often overlooked but should be at the top of the list when purchasing attachments. It can do several needed tasks that no other implement can, and it can possibly take the place of a box blade or adjust-

able rear blade if funds are limited. Since the front-end loader is at the front end, it can typically be left attached.

### ROTARY CUTTER

The next required implement is the rotary cutter. What is a rotary cutter? A bush hog, of course! That's the more-common name for an implement that is another one of those required pieces of equipment that will be hooked to the rear of the tractor for most of the year.



**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.

With a rotary cutter, landowners can mow roads, food plots, make shooting lanes, create new forest openings, and even mow the grass around the farm. Rotary cutters are essentially heavy duty mowers that can cut anything from grass and high shrubs to small trees.

## DISK HARROW

Of course, landowners can't prepare any food plots without a disk. The disk harrow is another one of the most-used tractor implements. It allows landowners to break up dirt, kill weeds and prepare fields for planting, but it can also be used for leveling out rutted roads and creating and/or maintaining fire breaks.

The front-end loader, rotary cutter and disk harrow are, by far, the top three implements required for any landowner with a tractor. Without them, few land-management activities can be completed, but others can make life easier, too.

## THE OTHER HELPERS

If space or a budget isn't limited, landowners can invest in several other implements to make planting food plots simple and efficient. A row planter and seed drill are wonderful implements for setting seed in the ground at the perfect depth.

Row planters are typically made for setting large seeds like corn, soybeans and chufa. They can precisely and accurately set seed at a certain depth and prescribed spacing.

Seed drills are also relatively precise and are best for setting small seed like clover, wheat, rye and triticale. Seed drills can be set to plant seeds at certain depths and at relative intervals, but they aren't as precise as row planters. Both seed drills and row planters can make planting easy and with ultimate precision.

A culti-packer is another unique attachment that is essentially a large drum pulled behind the tractor to pack the seeds in the soil. They are best used for small seeds like clover and cereal grains.

There are also combination units that are pulled behind the tractor. These are multi-purpose machines that have a disk, planter, harrow and culti-packer all in one piece. With a few small adjustments, these machines can plant just about any sized seed and even mixtures of seeds with ease. Generally, these machines are quite expensive, but they can make single-pass planting possible, which makes establishing a food plot quick and simple.

Landowners wear many hats over the course of their tenure. From managing timber and commercial agriculture returns to taking care of their roads and their precious wildlife, landowners have plenty to do after the ink dries at the attorney's office. For many, managing their wildlife ranks high on the priority list where food plot and habitat management is a routine duty requiring mechanical assistance. ■

## BUDGET-FRIENDLY TOOLS FOR TRACTORS, ATVS

Managing properties and creating food plots requires some mechanical assistance but the mechanics always need attachments. While disks, rotary cutters and front-end loaders are important, some budget-friendly attachments that are required and can be used with a tractor or ATV.

While planters and seed drills are nice to have, everybody doesn't have these implements. Luckily, landowners can get the job done with some lower-priced options. A rotary spreader can take the place of a planter in many cases. Even when landowners use a planter, they often have a rotary spreader to spread their fertilizer, lime and other granular materials, but seeds can also be distributed with the rotary spreader. Landowners may not get the same precision and accuracy of a row planter or seed drill, but it will certainly get the job done.



A rear spreader can be pulled behind an ATV and do a great job spreading fertilizer, lime or seed.

Jeff Burleson

For the food plotter with only an ATV, a rear spreader can be used in lieu of a tractor spreader and is another necessary piece of equipment for the ATV food plotter.

The second and equally important implement is the sprayer. Landowners will get routine use out of a sprayer for both food plots and complete land maintenance. Sprayers are typically economical and are needed to spray herbicides and insecticides on food plots, road edges and anywhere where chemical control is needed. And these can easily be mounted to ATVs with large booms to take care of small to medium-sized jobs.

Last, a chain harrow is another one of those inexpensive pieces of equipment. For \$100 or less, landowners can purchase a chain harrow that can do a wide variety of tasks. It can be used three ways: pulled with teeth down facing forward (most aggressive); teeth down facing backwards or upside down (least aggressive). The chain harrow can remove debris from plots, prepare the soil and cover up seed. Small chain harrows can be purchased and pulled behind ATVs.

Equipment can be expensive, but several options can provide benefits to a landowner without breaking the bank. ■

## SMALL CRAFT ADVISORY

Phillip Gentry

Upgrading your sonar game will reap dividends in both finding and catching fish this season.



# IS YOUR KAYAK CHARGED UP?

ELECTRONICS, BATTERY IMPROVEMENTS ARE BASIC FOR PADDLERS

**M**ore than any other month, February is when it's important to watch the weather and pick the right days to be on the water. Cold, windy or rainy days may not be the best to be on the water but are great to be in the shop, garage or fishing cave to work on rigging and upgrading your paddlecraft.

One of the areas that may need your attention is the sonar/electronics department. Don't have one? You need to get one. Already have one? You need a better one.

As technology undergoes rapid changes, anglers need to keep up — or at least not fall so far behind. Several years ago, kayak anglers used to look at having a depth finder/sonar unit on a plastic boat as a luxury or even an oddity, but not so today.

## ADVANCED SONAR

Other than keeping track of literally everything on the water, the biggest fishing advances in sonar have been real-time scanning to the left, right, down and even forward. One of the concerns for the kayak angler is where and how to mount the transducer to make these new, directional scanning sonars work properly on a kayak.

Another huge advance in technology when it comes to putting electronics on human-powered boats has been in powering the electronics. Typical, 12-volt, deep-cycle batteries take up too much space and severely overload a kayak.

## THESE BATTERIES FIT

Fortunately, the development of a small, lightweight, rechargeable 12-volt battery that provides the required amperage of today's electronics units came into being.

The state-of-the-art, lead-acid battery is the valve-regulated type — sometimes called "sealed" or maintenance-free — that fixes the acid electrolyte in a gel or an absorptive fiberglass mat. The advantage of this SLA design is that the battery needs no water additions, can be operated in any position, and can be used in close proximity to people and sensitive equipment.

Other battery types include nickel cadmium or lithium batteries which are either seriously more expensive or less user friendly than SLAs. ■



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.



## SMALL CRAFT ADVISORY

continued



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**MSRP is \$149.00.**

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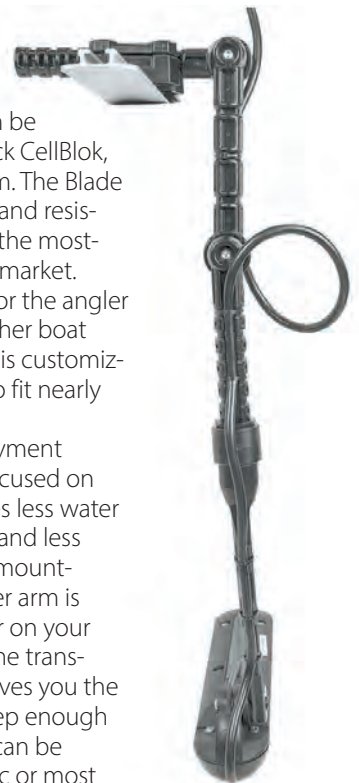
The YakAttack SwitchBlade can be attached to either your YakAttack CellBlok, deck mount or on a track system. The Blade is designed to minimize gurgle and resistance, making the SwitchBlade the most-efficient transducer arm on the market.

The arm folds up compactly. For the angler who wants to dial it in to fit his/her boat perfectly, the length of the arm is customizable and can be cut to length to fit nearly any kayak.

Unlike other transducer deployment arms, the new SwitchBlade is focused on speed and adjustability. It causes less water turbulence, resulting in a faster and less noisy over-the-side transducer mounting solution. Whether transducer arm is mounted on top of a CellBlok or on your kayak's gunwale, the depth of the transducer is easily adjustable and gives you the ability to get the transducer deep enough for your side-scan fish finder. It can be attached to a YakAttack GearTrac or most other kayak track systems.

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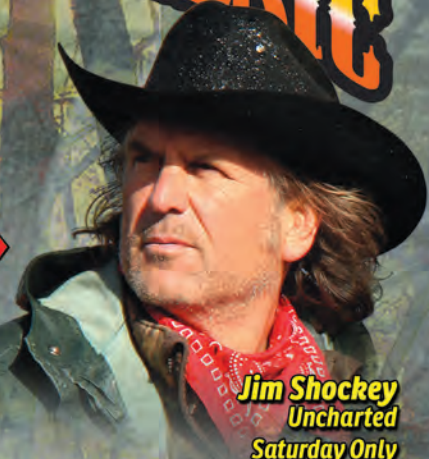
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## COOKING ON THE WILD SIDE

Jerry Dilsaver

## A DISH OF CAJUN SPICE

THIS SEAFOOD/SAUSAGE CHOWDER WILL KEEP YOU WARM ALL OVER



Jerry Dilsaver

**C**arolina winters feature some cold days, but mostly, there are only a few at a time, with more moderate and occasionally downright warm days separating them. Still, it's nice to come inside for lunch or dinner and have a meal that is tasty, filling and warms you to the soles of your feet.

This is one of those meals, and putting it together with seafood makes it even better. After trying it once, many folks prepare this often. It tastes good, is filling and warms you to the core, so why not?

This is excellent anytime, but it is guaranteed to hit the spot on those days when you break for lunch after a morning of hunting small game. While the savory taste of the shrimp and fish still lingers in your mouth, the warmth is already on its way to chilly toes and fingers. It does the same for fishermen too; it tastes good when you return.

You'll have to pull shrimp out of your freezer or visit your favorite fishmonger, but you can add the fish from a fresh catch. This particular version uses king mackerel, as a friend dropped off

some fresh fillets only a day earlier. However, striper, wahoo or any fish with firm meat will work well.

The consummate sportsman will also have some smoked venison or feral pig sausage to use, but I didn't have that — or friends willing to contribute a link for this batch. This recipe uses Bright Leaf smoked sausage from Carolina Packers in Smithfield, N.C., and it does the job well, with a good smoke flavor without being too spicy. This is an iconic North Carolina brand and isn't available everywhere. Folks in other locations can substitute their favorite brands.

While not a Cajun by birth, I really enjoy many of the spices and combinations used by Louisiana cooks. The best salute to this was a few years back when a waitress in Des Allemands, La., told me I talked funny but ate like a local. With February being Mardi Gras time, I thought this would be a good time to offer a salute to the many Cajun cooks whose wonderful food I've had the opportunity to enjoy. I really think you'll like this. It has a little spice, but isn't hot and combines several good tastes. ■

Shrimp, fish and sausage makes for a great chowder, especially when you add some Cajun spices.

# CAJUN SEAFOOD/SAUSAGE CHOWDER

Fat Tuesday is Feb. 25 this year. I wanted to cook something that was a warm, filling dish, but with a salute to Mardi Gras and my favorite Cajun cooking. You can find gumbo, jambalaya, red beans and rice and étouffée on February specials at many restaurants, so I decided to go a little deeper. This is a seafood chowder that uses Cajun seasoning to get it going but isn't too spicy for those with milder palates.

Many sportsmen will be able to find all the meat ingredients in their freezers, but if you can't, your favorite local fishmonger will be able to supply the shrimp and fish. The best preparation is with homemade venison or feral pig smoked sausage, but that may be the most difficult ingredient to find in your freezer. Any smoked sausage should work, but as the television commercial likes to point out, "Sometimes OK isn't OK."

There are a couple of tips for keeping this in the excellent category, not just very good. First is cutting the sausage into bite-size pieces before cooking it. The Bright Leaf sausage I suggest is already fully cooked, so you're really just warming it to get some drippings to sauté the shrimp, fish and onions. However, by cutting the sausage first, you can get slightly crunchy edges on the pieces. I like this and you may also, but it isn't required. Because it is already fully cooked,

## PREPARATION:

Clean and devein shrimp, cut into 2 or 3 pieces depending on size. Cut fish into roughly thumb-size pieces. Cut smoked sausage into bite-size pieces. Chop onions into medium-size pieces. Cut potatoes into halves. Slice green onions.

Season shrimp and fish lightly all over with Cajun seasoning, and add salt and pepper to taste. Heat a large, deep, cast-iron pot to medium and lightly brown sausage. Remove sausage and leave enough drippings to cover the bottom of the pot. If your sausage doesn't leave enough drippings, add a little butter or buttery non-stick cooking spray. Sauté fish, then shrimp, just to the point of turning opaque and remove.

Melt butter in pot and sauté onions until they turn opaque. Stir in the garlic and flour, being very careful not to scorch the flour. This should only take about 30 seconds to a minute at most. Add the broth, potatoes, a couple of chopped green onions, thyme and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat, cover and simmer until the potatoes are tender — approximately 8 minutes.

Stir in the corn and cream and simmer another 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in the shrimp, fish, sausage and paprika and simmer another 4 minutes, stirring often. Turn off heat and allow to sit off burner for another 2 minutes,

the sausage doesn't have a lot of drippings, so you'll have to augment it with a spoon of grease, butter or non-stick cooking spray.

Don't overly season the shrimp and fish unless you like it spicy. You want to be able to see the Cajun seasoning on the pieces, but don't coat them heavily if this will be eaten by anyone with a mild palate. I sprinkle in a little more Cajun seasoning when I add the onions and garlic. If you want more kick, use more seasoning or make this using blackened seasoning instead of Cajun and coat the shrimp and fish well.

Be careful when adding the flour and don't overcook it. This isn't quite a roux, but if it gets scorched, the only thing to do is make it over.

Golden potatoes are creamier than white potatoes and add to this chowder. If you can't find mini golden potatoes, use the larger ones and cube them down to about thumb-size or slightly larger. They really do taste better than other potatoes in this.

This cooks best in a well-seasoned, cast-iron pot. My largest isn't quite large enough, so I use it for the browning and sautéing, then switch to a stock pot.

Laissez les bons temps rouler, and enjoy a bowl or three of Cajun seafood and sausage chowder! ■

## INGREDIENTS:

**6 ounces smoked sausage**

**½ pound medium shrimp (26 to 30 count)**

**½ pound firm fish**

**1 medium sweet onion**

**1 pound baby yellow potatoes**

**4 cups chicken broth**

**3 cups frozen corn kernels**

**1 bundle green onions**

**1 cup heavy whipping cream**

**2 tbsp all-purpose flour**

**1 tbsp minced garlic**

**3 tbsp Cajun seasoning**

**1 tbsp butter**

**1 tsp ground thyme,**

**1 tsp smoked paprika**

**Freshly ground black pepper and pink salt to taste**

**Optional: Bacon bits, cheese, cayenne pepper and blackened seasoning.**



Jerry Dilsaver

stirring once or twice. Garnish each serving with a sprinkle of paprika and green onions.

Some of my friends like to also garnish with a sprinkling of bacon bits and/or cheese. For a spicier chowder, add more Cajun seasoning, a little cayenne pepper or use blackened seasoning instead of Cajun seasoning. Serve this with several hot sauces on the table.

This almost begs for a slice of warm hearty bread to sop up the bowl. I like to begin with a lettuce wedge or green salad and warm bread pudding is the perfect dessert for those wanting to add something sweet. ■



**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](mailto:captainjerry@captainjerry.com).

## HEAD FOR THE MOUNTAINS

Robert Satterwhite

More than a million trout raised in hatcheries in western North Carolina and Upstate South Carolina are stocked annually in streams and lakes.



# HATCH THE CATCH

STOCKED TROUT ARE THE CORNERSTONE OF FISHING IN THE CAROLINAS

**S**tocked trout are the backbone of trout fishing programs in North Carolina and South Carolina, providing ample fishing opportunities for anglers of all skill levels.

Beginning in February in South Carolina and in March in North Carolina, hatchery-supported waters will be stocked with more than a million brook, brown and rainbow trout. Few restrictions apply. Limits are five trout per day in South Carolina and seven in North Carolina. Trout must be caught with hook and line, on live or artificial bait, using single or treble hooks.

Hatchery-supported streams in North Carolina are closed for stocking at the end of February; they reopen to fishing the first Saturday in April, April 6 this year. South Carolina does not have a closed season on hatchery supported streams.

In North Carolina, more than 1,000 miles of streams and several small lakes in the western section of the state are designated as hatchery-supported waters. South Carolina hatchery-supported waters are in Greenville, Oconee and Pickens counties and the tailwaters of Lake Hartwell and Lake Murray.

Trout are delivered by specially equipped trucks and stocked by hand, except in the wild sections of the Chattooga River that stocking trucks cannot reach. Five-inch fingerlings, approximately 25,000 trout, are stocked by helicopters.

## STOCKING SIZES

Most South Carolina streams are stocked with trout 9 inches or longer. In a few select streams, the minimum stocking size is 12 inches.

North Carolina stocks its streams with 10-inch trout and releases an unspecified number of fish that exceed 14 inches “just to make the fishing interesting,” one hatchery official said.

Trout for the state’s hatchery-supported waters are raised at South Carolina’s Walhalla Hatchery in Mountain Rest and at North Carolina’s four coldwater hatcheries: one in Transylvania County and three in McDowell County.

The Bobby Setzer Hatchery in the Pisgah National Forest near Brevard provides the bulk of trout for the western



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

North Carolina counties, producing close to 1.8 million per year, counting fry and adult trout. Trout are held in 16 outside raceways, covered with wire mesh to prevent predation by herons, otters and other predators.

Trout for stocking are produced using similar methods at the Walhalla hatchery and at the other three North Carolina hatcheries.

Brood trout are monitored to catch them at the peak of their spawning cycle. Females are “milked” of their eggs, which are fertilized with the sperm of male trout. Fertilized eggs are placed in incubators until they hatch.

After they hatch, the nascent trout form egg sacs, which provide their only nutrition. When the egg sacs are emptied, trout are moved to inside raceways and fed with high-protein, commercial feed. After they reach fingerling stage, approximately 4 inches, they are placed in outside raceways until they reach stocking size. The entire process from fertilized egg to adult trout takes between 10 and 14 months.

## STERILE STOCKERS

Early in the egg-to-fingerling stages trout are sterilized to prevent them from breeding with wild or native trout and disrupting genetic cycles. Sterilization also speeds growth and maturation.

North Carolina streams are stocked monthly or weekly, depending on angler pressure. Stockings continue until summer when streams, especially in lower elevations, are too warm or too low to sustain high numbers of trout.

The March stockings in North Carolina give trout ample time to spread out in streams, providing a more sporting type of fishing. Monthly and weekly stockings, however, do not give trout adequate time to disperse, and anglers who follow stocking times and places can deplete stocked fish in a manner of minutes — legal, if they obey limits, but just a tad unethical.

Adam Moticak, supervisor of the Bobby Setzer Hatchery, said 85% of stocked fish are caught by anglers.

Moticak said the standard formula for stocking streams is 40% brook, 40% rainbow, and 20% brown trout. The formula at Setzer Hatchery is 40% brook, 40% brown, and 20% rainbow. Because of low pH conditions, the Setzer Hatchery cannot maintain high numbers of rainbow, brook and brown trout are not affected. ■



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## SPECKLED TRUTH

Chris Bush

Chris Bush



# GO WITH YOUR GUT? FISHING IN THE INFO AGE

Fishing information gleaned from a number of sources can put you on the right track, but it's more likely your own knowledge and intuition that will lead you in the right direction.

Let's face it, social media has made the fishing world a smaller place. Locations and techniques that were once guarded by a secret handshake and a personal voucher are now available to all anglers like samples at a Costco.

It's all part of living in the information age. Anglers scour media outlets seeking a mountain of information in hopes that their next trip will be more successful. Fortunately or unfortunately — depending on how you look at it — trophy speckled trout always seem to be one step ahead. Their evasiveness across all estuaries seems to adapt to our thirst for knowledge, leaving us sometimes scratching our heads and inspiring me to write about one key component that is often overlooked: intuition.

## MAKE ADJUSTMENTS

I continue to educate myself on the latest equipment and techniques through

the myriad of resources available online. I immerse myself in conversation of what I think is working in an area and where I should focus my efforts, and like many anglers, this doesn't always lead me to success. What I've found to be most successful during many of my trips is my ability to make adjustments.

If you're fishing an area that has been producing fish on topwaters and suspending baits and the bite has seemingly shut down, you need to peel back the onion of why it's not producing and consider adjusting your technique. Maybe it's because there has been an environmental shift in conditions? Maybe the bait is staged differently on the flat? It could be a host of things, but figuring out and adjusting your technique could be the difference in your angling success.

As a result, a simple switch to a soft plastic with a varied retrieve might produce a bite, and when it does, strive for consistency. Another example may

involve the fish moving all together, but having that intuition and confidence to make adjustments and find high-potential water comes with experience only achieved on the water.

## INTUITION VS. INFO

You should always trust your fishing intuition. I grew up under the fishing instruction of my dad, who would always tell me, "Son, don't read about the news, get out there and make the news." For years I heard that phrase, and as I continued to grow as an angler, the more it made sense.

What he was saying was, don't fish an area just because you've heard it has fish;



Chris Bush is an Air Force officer and a licensed charter captain, husband and father. He spends his time targeting big speckled trout and sharing his knowledge on his website, *Speckled Truth*.

instead, fish the conditions and find the fish. Too many times, I've watched him stop the boat and fish a spot we've never fished before and be successful. I've also been back to those spots on occasion and have had limited success simply because the "conditions just weren't right."

## USEFUL INFO

Angling information, on the other hand, is what we find online. This could be tutorials on how to use your electronics to better storing your soft plastics. It can also contain spot information from local forums about where fish are being caught, but it won't necessarily put fish over the gunwales — your fishing intuition will.

I'll leave you with this. My dad and I, on our first trip down to South Texas, fished with Capt. Mike McBride, a mentor and now a good friend. As you would expect, my dad and Mike got

to talking about the centuries worth of trout fishing knowledge they both possessed. As a fly on the wall, on a flat in the lower Laguna Madre, I heard my dad utter his coined phrase to McBride: "Son, don't read about the news, get out there and make the news."

McBride, perpetuating his agreement, decided to move the boat one more time to adjust to a water-color change driven by the strong wind. Immediately, McBride and I went back-to-back on big trout, and without hesitation he looked at my dad and says, "Don't read about the news, read the water, then make the news!"

I can't encourage you enough to store what you've read online in your memory bank. Draw from that knowledge when required, but never second guess your intuition, this and only this will make you consistently successful. ■



**Harrison Smith**

Harrison Smith, 11, from Inman, S.C., killed these two does, his first ever, on Dec. 26, 2019.



**Kylie Pegram**

Kylie Pegram, 9, caught this nice Spanish mackerel in the surf at Emerald Isle last August.



**Lori Brady**

Lori Brady caught this 31-pound flathead catfish on North Carolina's Lake Tillery.

## Hunting/Fishing SCRAPBOOK



**Kyle Ennis**

Kyle Ennis killed this beautiful buck on Sept. 7, 2019, in Vance County, N.C.



**Jason, Karen, Aiden Ceisner**

The Ceisner family from Raleigh caught this nice mess of flounder last summer fishing with Capt. Dennis Barbour of Island Tackle in Carolina Beach.

Big speckled trout have plenty of places to hunt for bait in the estuaries around Little River, S.C.



# LITTLE RIVER SPECKS ARE ON THE FEED

## State-line waters fill up with trout as winter reaches its peak

**W**inter has fully set in across the Carolinas, with typically cool days and some freezing nightly temperatures. Yet the Carolinas are also known for a few 70-degree days mixed in throughout the winter, and that makes a day on the water more than just appealing. Anglers in the Little River region are in luck, as the winter speckled trout fishing can be off the charts.

Brandon Huskins of Any Tide Fishing Charters in North Myrtle Beach, S.C., covets the waters along the North Carolina/South Carolina border in the winter.

"Trout fishing can be hot during the winter months," said Huskins (843-877-7068). "We have both some big numbers of fish and some real gators in our waters in February."

Huskins fishes the inshore waters in and around the state line. He finds trout in schools in both deep and shallow regions of the Little River area.

"Fish typically push into deep pockets when the water gets real chilly

— especially on high tide. But I also catch some big fish in 3 feet or less along sunny banks with oysters," he said.

Huskins fishes a variety of habitats this time of year, but fish will typically be holding in an ambush position, whether in shallow or deep locales.

"I look for seams and rips with fast-moving water close to slower-moving water near oyster or grassy points," he said. "The trout will stay in the slow section and wait for the bait to get washed by."

Bait in the winter isn't as plentiful as during warmer seasons, but trout, redfish and a few other predators still make a living on the scattered forage resources in inshore waters. Mullet, mud minnows and possibly a few schools of glass minnows will be available in these estuaries, making baitfish imitations a primary lure choice.

Huskins utilizes one of three basic lures in winter. Primarily, he will use a Z-Man Trout Trick rigged on a ¼-ounce jighead in most places he fishes.

"I will bounce these Trout Tricks

methodically on the bottom. Trout will eat these lures in both shallow and deep places in the winter," he said.

Second, Huskins will tie on a large MirrOlure when he is concentrating on big trout.

"If you want to find big, 6- to 9-pound trout, throw big mullet-imitation lures. When trout grow to large adults, their staple diet is big mullet, and big MirrOlures and Zara Spooks are ideal lure choices," he said.

Last, Huskins will fish an artificial shrimp up under a popping cork. Even though shrimp are scarce this time of year, speckled trout have a special taste for these decapod crustaceans.

The air and water may be cold this time of year. Yet it is one of the best times of the year to get out on the water.

"We have fewer people on the water this time of year, but it is one of my favorite times to fish," he said. ■

— Jeff Burleson

# TARGET NC STRIPERS

## in over Roanoke River this month

**S**portsmen attend boat shows and fishing seminars across North Carolina in February, but if all they do is learn, they're missing out on some great winter fishing for striped bass on three of the coastal river systems that drain northeast and east-central North Carolina: the Neuse, Pamlico and Roanoke.

"Basically, in winter, I'm fishing the lower Roanoke for stripers," said Richard Andrews of Bath, N.C., who said the area holds a resident striper population that doesn't return to the Atlantic Ocean after the end of the spring spawn.

"They spawn but stay in the lower part of the Roanoke or might go out into (Albemarle Sound) for the summer," said Andrews, who owns Tar-Pam Guide Service (252-945-9715).

Winter stripers concentrate in river channels, feeder creeks, oxbows and "guts" because of abundant blueback herring and alewives that spawn in those areas this month.

"American and hickory shad spawn at the same time," Andrews said. "Stripers aren't much interested in shad, but they sure like herrings."

Andrews hunts for fish on main-river ledges in the Roanoke River from Jamesville to Bachelor Bay.

"We'll throw ½-ounce jigheads with 5-inch Z-Man plastic jerkbaits at river channels," he said. "Sometimes, fish will be in the swamps, depending on the water level, but I mostly fish from 8 to 45 feet deep, close to the bottom, for schooled fish I see on a high-definition side-scan or a down-imaging scanner."

Andrews lets his lures fall to the bottom, then hops or jigs them. If stripers attack baitfish on the surface, he casts a white Zara Spook topwater lure at them.

If the topwater bite shuts off, Andrews bounces a Z-Man split-tail Fluke off the bottom in white, yellow or pink, smeared with some fish-attractant gel.

His tackle includes a 7-foot, medium-action rod fitted with a baitcaster or spinning reel spooled with braided line.

"I like 10-pound Sufix braid," Andrews said, "because coastal rivers are a marine environment, so that means sharp stuff, such as barnacles and even edges of metal in the water. Braid saves a lot of cut-offs, is strong and can handle a striper's runs."

Anglers may experience 30 to 50 striper days, even 100 fish if the bite is especially hot. ■

— Craig Holt



Retired guide Rick Owen shows off the kind of striped bass he expects Lake Hartwell to produce in February.

Rick Owen

## HARTWELL STRIPERS:

### Look in the shallows for February trophies

**F**ebruary is a really good time to boat a trophy striped bass on South Carolina's Lake Hartwell, according to retired guide Rick Owen, but you have to get a lot closer to the shoreline than you might think to find one.

"Winter is the time to pull planer boards with gizzard shad close to the banks or in the backs of the creeks where the big fish roam," Owen said. "If your trolling motor is leaving a mud trail, you just might be in the right place."

Owen (864-356-7271) recommends pulling a couple of Mini Mack umbrella rigs along with the spread of shad and planer boards

"I also deploy two ultralight free-lines behind the boat rigged with live herring to catch the fish that are feeding on top, and you would be surprised at just how many fish I catch on these ultralight rigs."

Owen said he usually locates fish this time of year using two different tactics.

"With sea gulls and loons all over the lake, it's not much of a problem to locate the bait, and where there's bait, the fish are going to be very close," he said. "I also locate them on my (depth finder), and the minute that I get them under the boat I drop my live bait and Mini Macks into the schools."

If the fish won't eat live bait, Owen said Captain Mack umbrella rigs are automatic tools for the winter bite. He also recommends pulling the Mini Mack rigs behind planer boards at .08 mph.

Retired from active guiding, Owen concentrates on providing instructional fishing trips targeting stripers and hybrids on Hartwell.

"One main item that we cover is how to locate stripers and hybrids, and then the best methods to catch them," he said. "There are many ways to catch stripers and hybrids on Hartwell, and (we) cover all of these points."

Owen said fishermen on his instructional fishing trips are given the opportunity to ask all the questions that very few professional striper fishermen will share.

"Even though I'm retired, I spend a lot of time teaching and helping out with guide trips," Owen said. ■

— Pat Robertson



Richard Andrews

Guide Richard Andrews (right) concentrates on the lower end of the Roanoke River for resident striped bass this month.

# TROLL BIG CREEKS

## for High Rock Lake's winter striped bass

**G**uide Jerry Hill of Lexington, N.C., has some simple advice for fishermen targeting striped bass on North Carolina's High Rock Lake this month.

"If you want to catch stripers in February on High Rock, go to the creeks," Hill said. "Flat Swamp and Abbotts creeks usually hold plenty of forage, which attracts stripers."

Hill said the presence of diving birds will indicate where the forage is in the creeks. Stripers can often be found in conjunction with the forage in 12 to 16 feet of water around humps, high spots and points. Sometimes, fish will be feeding in open water over no structure in particular.

"The fish will go as far back into the creeks as the baitfish go," said Hill, who trolls bucktails at about 2.3 mph on downriggers and outfits with lead-core line.

"I troll slowly in the winter because the water is cold and the fish aren't that active," said Hill (336-247-1265). "I use smaller baits, such as 3/8-ounce green bucktail jigs with green plastic trailers, small Sassy Shad plastics and Alabama rigs with small swimbaits."

Hill mounts his 8-foot, medium/heavy rods mated with Penn 320 reels on the gunwales and transom of his boat. Between the lead-core outfits with three colors out and the downriggers, he can cover the water column most likely used by stripers, usually 10 to 12 feet.

"I rarely catch stripers deeper than 14 feet at High Rock," said Hill,

who has most of his success on sunny days with a light ripple on the water.

"Water color doesn't matter," he said. "High Rock ranges from brown to stained most of the year. The lake is rarely clear. Unless the lake gets muddy and trashy, the fish will bite."

Hill said trolling speed and depth are the most-important factors for catching winter stripers at the Rock.

"You've about got to knock the fish on their heads to get strikes in cold water," he said. "They're not going to chase baits unless they're surface feeding."

Hill always keeps one pre-rigged rod close by to cast for breaking stripers.

"A lot of fishermen pull live bait in the winter with success, but I've been trolling for more than 25 years with bucktails and plastics, and that's how I prefer to fish," Hill said. "I don't like to spend time catching live bait or the trouble of keeping the bait alive."

Hill makes his own bucktails, and a good number of local fishermen use them.

Hill said February is a good month for hooking a striper weighing 10 pounds or more, although anglers may catch only two to eight fish a day. ■

— Tony Garitta

High Rock Lake doesn't produce big numbers of stripers in February, but most are quality fish.



Guide Jot Owens targets the stripers in the catch-and-release fishery around Wilmington, N.C. at the mouth of creeks that feed major rivers on a falling tide.



Jerry Dilsaver

## ARE CAPE FEAR STRIPERS ON THE MEND?

### Disastrous 2018 fall gives way to good winter fishing in rivers around Wilmington, N.C.

It's still way too early to rush around proclaiming, "They're back," but fishermen are seeing striped bass return to the rivers and creeks around Wilmington, N.C.

This fishery was hit hard in September 2018, when four days of heavy rain from Hurricane Florence washed an overabundance of organic matter into the water, and the dissolved oxygen count plunged to near zero. There were fish kills, and many fish fled the area in search of better water. Striper fishing around Wilmington last winter was as slow as anyone could remember.

The rebuild isn't finished by any means, but fishermen have been thrilled to see the numbers of striped bass increase through December and January. The rivers and creeks in the Cape Fear River system were already under a possession moratorium that hasn't been lifted, but there have been some days of surprisingly good catch-and-release striper fishing.

Striper fishing around Wilmington is primarily a winter activity, beginning in December and lasting into the spring. The Cape Fear is the main focus, with fishing also occurring in the Northeast Cape Fear and Brunswick rivers, plus many of their tributary creeks. The rivers vary in salinity with the amount of rainfall, but jurisdictional boundaries don't change.

Legally, only the Cape Fear has coastal waters, which are below the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge, while the Cape Fear upriver from

the bridge, plus the Northeast Cape Fear and Brunswick rivers are classified as joint/inland waters. All the creeks in this area are classified as inland waters. This is important as license requirements vary.

All of the water is tidal, and that affects fishing. A popular tactic is to target creek mouths during a falling tide. Stripers, plus occasional red drum, speckled trout and catfish, gather in those areas to feed on baitfish washing out of the creeks. Most of this is shallow-water fishing with soft plastics fished on swimbait hooks with no or minimal weight. The retrieve is slow, twitching the bait upwards to get it noticed.

The rivers also have deeper channels, plus lots of vertical structure from docks, bridges and sunken barges and boats. The deeper water has more current and requires more weight to get a soft plastic down, and the wiggle isn't as seductive. Many fishermen prefer big-lipped diving lures in the deeper water and sometimes troll along docks and bridge pilings instead of casting.

Capt. Jot Owens fishes the area often. He said, "If you aren't occasionally losing a lure, you aren't fishing close enough to the structure."

Keeper season for stripers is closed in the recovering fishery, but fishermen can enjoy catch-and-release fishing. ■

— Jerry Dilsaver



Brian Cope

## STONO RIVER SPECKS offer plenty of action for February anglers

**M**any inshore anglers don't give much thought or effort into catching speckled trout in February, but plenty of specks are still active in the Stono River, south of Charleston, S.C., and except on the most brutal of cold days, they're willing to bite.

Guide Gifford Scott of SC Flats Fishing (843-412-6429) said this time of year, it may take a little longer to find the fish, but once you do, you can catch big numbers relatively quickly.

"You might just pull up to a spot, and they are there," Scott said, but you might not get a bite. It changes from day to day, but as long as you're willing to keep looking, you'll find them. And it will be worth the time. They can bite non-stop when the conditions are right."

Scott, who is based in Johns Island, keeps three types of areas in mind during cold months. Small creeks off of the main river are good places to start. Wooden docks are good targets, too. And oyster shell-lined banks where secondary creeks meet the main-river channel deserve attention. The Stono has plenty of all three.

"Sometimes, they'll be at all three places. Other days, you'll find them on just one type," he said.

Gifford said swimbaits on jigheads are productive lures. He likes the D.O.A. C.A.L. shad tail on a Ralph Phillips jighead. This time of year, he sticks with a 3-inch bait on the lightest jighead the

current allows him to use. He uses a variety of colors but does have one that he prefers.

"A lot of colors will work well on any given day," he said. "But I really like the 400 Greene. It's a green color that stands out and works well in either clear or dingy water. It's one of those colors that just works in many different situations."

Even more important than the color, Scott said, is the speed of retrieve.

"This time of year, you really have to slow it down. When you think you've slowed down enough, you need to slow it down some more," he said. "And if you're not getting bit at all, slow it down again. I can't stress enough how important that is no matter what lure you're using this time of year."

Scott said once you find trout, it's not uncommon to catch one on almost every cast for 15 or 20 minutes, and for the bite to completely stop after that.

"It may be that they are just that disrupted after so much action; it may be a slight change they've noticed in the tide or current direction. It could really be a lot of different reasons, but once it shuts down, it's time to try some similar spots until you get on them again," he said. ■

Guide Gifford Scott says you have to slow down your retrieve to take speckled trout this month in the Stono River.

— Brian Cope

# BOTTOM-FISHING

## are efforts productive out of Murrells Inlet

**R**egardless of the temperature, a good February fishing forecast should always end with light and variable winds for offshore and nearshore fishermen. When seas are calm, anglers with 18- to 30-foot vessels can have a rip-reeling time in winter 5 or 40 miles off the beach, with epic bottom-fishing opportunities for sheepshead and lunker black sea bass.

Adam Goodwin of Tide Chaser Fishing Charters regularly schedules ocean excursions for his clients in the Murrells Inlet, S.C., area throughout the winter.

"The sheepshead and black sea bass are very plentiful on structure," said Goodwin (843-457-0778). "We are catching plenty of both, but the big black sea bass are thick right now."

Mild, winter conditions continue to moderate ocean temperatures, which has kept nearshore structures fully stocked with fish.

"The water temperatures are not too cold for the fish to go away, and we are catching them about as fast as we can drop down baits," said Goodwin, who will fish a wide variety of places, from some of his favorite ledges only 5 miles off the beach to other structures over 40 miles offshore.

"The fish are holding on structure in a wide variety of water depths, but the structure is the key, and some structures will hold more fish than others," he said.

Goodwin plans his trips to hit a few of his favorite spots and he will fish both sides of the structure to see where the fish are holding. If they aren't biting at one place, he will pick up and move to deeper or shallower water until he finds them congregated.

Mostly, these structures are holding large schools of sheepshead and black sea bass. Goodwin said black sea bass are larger this year than in years past.

"The size limit for black sea bass is 14 inches, and we are catching three and four-man limits on many of our trips," he said. "Black sea bass give a good fight and are fantastic fish to eat."

Cut bait on double-drop rigs is his choice for black sea bass, but he will use fiddler crabs on jigheads if he wants to target sheepshead.

"The sheepshead shift to the reefs and ledges in winter and feast on the barnacles adhered to the structure. When you drop a live fiddler crab to them, they just go crazy for it," he said.

Goodwin prefers a ½-ounce jighead for sheepshead, but will use as heavy as a 1½-ounce jighead if the current is strong.

"You don't want it to just sit on the bottom. Instead, you want it to flutter around a foot or two off the bottom. But when you drop into an area abundant with sheepshead or a big school of black sea bass, the fiddler crab will not stay down long without getting eaten by something," he said. ■

— Jeff Burleson



Adam Goodwin

Nice sheepshead hang out around nearshore structure out of Murrells Inlet, S.C.

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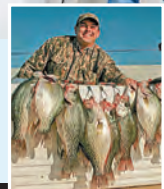
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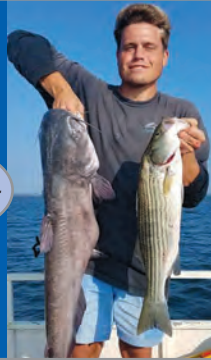
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**Dylan Locklear**

Dylan Locklear of Pembroke, N.C., killed these three coyotes at the same time on Oct. 31, 2019, in Robeson County.



**Suzanne Brown**

Suzanne Brown of Asheboro, N.C., caught this nice blue catfish on cut bait at Badin Lake last summer.



**Randall Moss**

Randall Moss caught this 3-pound Spanish mackerel on an epoxy jig in the surf at Shackleford Banks.



**Sammy Allen**

Sammy Allen of Hamlet, N.C., took this nice gobbler on April 23, 2019, in Anson County.



**Braden Simmons**

Braden Simmons of Easley, S.C., celebrated his 14th birthday last fall by killing this 10-point buck.



**Kayo Auge**

Kayo Auge, 10, from Maysville, N.C., caught this big trout in the New River on Sept. 25, 2019.

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# Hunting/Fishing SCRAPBOOK



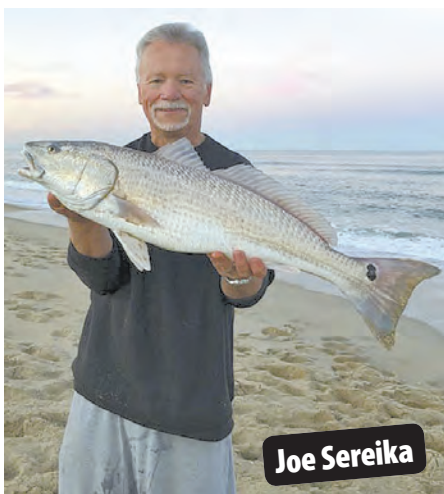
**Leon Pruzan**

Leon Pruzan killed his first turkey last spring in Halifax County, N.C.



**Mark Shepherd**

Mark Shepherd killed this nice 8-point buck last November from a ground blind in Pinewood, S.C.



**Joe Sereika**

Joe Sereika caught this 11-pound red drum in the surf at Duck, on North Carolina's Outer Banks, on Oct. 22, 2019.



**Tim Cook**

Tim Cook killed this nice buck in full velvet on Sept. 7, 2019, in Surry County. He was using a crossbow.



**Zach Hatfield**

Zach Erdmier Hatfield, 11, from Troutman, N.C., caught this big redfish off Oak Island on Sept. 28, 2019.



**Lucas Hatch**

Lucas Hatch of Garner, N.C., killed this pretty gobbler last spring. The bird had a 10½-inch beard and 1½-inch spurs.

## GOT PHOTOS? WE WANT 'EM

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**Garrett Fanning**

Garrett Fanning killed his first deer, this doe, the day before his ninth birthday last fall in Calhoun County, S.C.



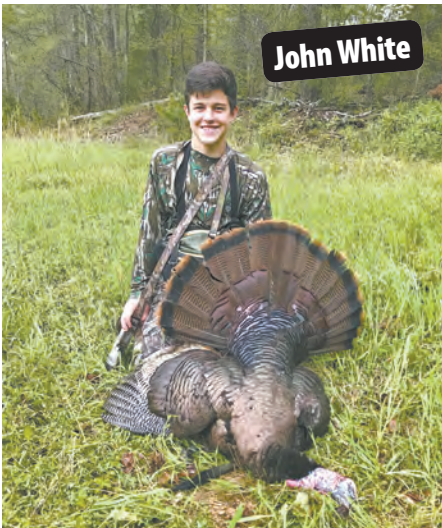
**Dillon Myers**

Fripp Island, S.C., produced this nice speckled trout last fall for Dillon Myers.



**Bryan Buckner**

Bryan Buckner of Saluda, N.C., caught this 6-pound bass on Sept. 2 in a lake near his home.



**John White**

Brothers John White, 14, and Layton White, 11, from Wilmington, N.C., had their gobblers by 6:45 a.m. on opening day of North Carolina's turkey season last April. The birds were taken in Davidson County. Both killed birds earlier in the youth season.



**Layton White**



**JoJo Anderson**

JoJo Anderson caught this big redfish in the Neuse River fishing with his father, Joe Anderson.



**Colten Hager**

Colten Hager, 8, killed this monster Cleveland County, N.C., gobbler with two beards last spring.



**Jillian Speights**

Jillian Speights, 15, killed this 6-point buck on Dec. 6, 2019, in Craven County, N.C.



**Miles Cothran**

Miles Cothran, 10, killed this nice buck, his second, in Clarendon County, S.C., last November.

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A.K. MCCALLUM CO.....	7	FLORENCE CENTER.....	27	SARAH JUDY'S INSURANCE AGENCY.....	59
BLACK'S CAMP.....	54, 80	FROST WATERFOWL TRUST, LLC.....	45	SEA ARK BOATS.....	39
BLUE WAVE BOATS.....	5	K2 MARINE.....	29	SOUTHEAST PRODUCTIONS.....	37
BOB'S GUIDE SERVICE ENCHORE.....	80	MARINE WAREHOUSE.....	45	SPORTSMAN'S WAREHOUSE.....	24
CAPPS TRAILERS.....	38	MOREE'S SPORTSMAN'S PRESERVE.....	21	SUZUKI MOTOR OF AMERICA, INC.....	32, 33
CAROLINA COMPOSITES, LLC.....	3	NICHOLS STORE, INC.....	57	WAKE COUNTY WILDLIFE CLUB.....	67
CAROLINA OUTDOOR EXPO, LLC.....	46, 47	NOAH'S ARK FISHING CHARTERS.....	80	WHITETAIL PROPERTIES.....	19
CHATLEE BOAT AND MARINE.....	84, 87	PALMETTO STATE TRAINING.....	44	WILSON MARINE.....	44
CHEROKEE RUN HUNTING LODGE.....	54, 87	PERFORMANCE EAST INC.....	15	XPRESS BY ALUMA-WELD, INC.....	2
CLARENDON COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE.....	4	PONCE D. MOODY FUNDING.....	19	YAMAHA MOTOR COMPANY.....	9
COLLINS INC.....	88	PRECISION MARINE, INC.....	12, 28		
COVE 2 COAST MARINE.....	38, 54	RALEIGH CONVENTION CENTER BOAT SHOW.....	31		
CWP PROSERIES.....	66	ROCK OUTDOORS.....	85		
DOSS MARINE.....	71	SANDY BOTTOM VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT.....	14		
DOWN EAST GUIDE SERVICE.....	80	SANTEE COOPER COUNTRY.....	43		
DRAKE SAFE COMPANY.....	21	SANTEE COOPER MONSTER CAT QUEST.....	43		

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