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SMALL WATERS,
BIG BASS



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45 CLASSIC TIPS FOR MARCH SLABS

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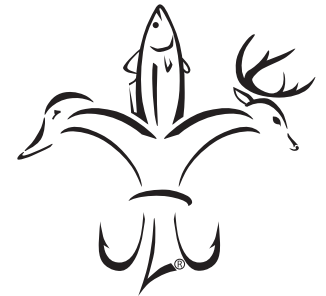
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Carolina SPORTSMAN

www.CarolinaSPORTSMAN.com

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Saturday & Sunday, 9 am - 6 pm EST

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.

P.O. Box 1199, Boutte, LA 70039-1199
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Kevin Davis may guide on the huge Santee Cooper lakes, but he's equally at home pulling nice bass out of small ponds. Photo by Terry Madewell

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Outdoor UPDATE

with Dan Kibler

Preston Scott's big Spartanburg County 9-pointer, killed last Oct. 11, was drawn as the grand-prize winner in Carolina Sportsman's Bag-A-Buck contest.



Dan Kibler of Winston-Salem, N.C., is managing editor of Carolina Sportsman magazine. He has been writing about the outdoors since 1985.

Dan Kibler

SC MAN IS BAG-A-BUCK WINNER ENTRY OF 9-POINT BUCK WINS GRAND PRIZE IN FOUR-MONTH CONTEST

Preston Scott picked up a 192-pound consolation prize last Oct. 11 for letting his 17-year-old son, Will, choose which deer stand he wanted to sit in on opening day of gun season in South Carolina's Spartanburg County.

"I gave him the choice, and Will wanted to sit in the deer stand that I would have sat in," said Scott, a financial advisor from Simpsonville, S.C. "I wound up walking back in the woods to a stand I hadn't even visited since the year before."

Around a half-hour after he climbed into the tri-pod stand, which he had located next to several white oak trees, he was standing over a 9-point, 192-pound buck.

And the best was yet to come. Scott entered the buck in *Carolina Sportsman's* Bag-A-Buck contest, and on Feb. 1, his entry was drawn as the grand-prize winner from the 186 entrants in the four-month contest.

Scott's grand-prize package includes a free, three-year subscription to *Carolina Sportsman*, a \$50 gift certificate to the online Sportsman Store, a two-day, deer-hog combo hunt for two people at Cherokee

Run Hunting Lodge in Chesterfield County, S.C., and an Energy Elite bow.

Scott had trail-camera photos of the buck, but he'd never seen it in person; the owner of an adjoining piece of land had. The stand in which he wound up

sitting that morning, he had not visited to fix things up or clear out the three shooting lanes, one directly in front of it and one to each side.

"I hadn't trimmed any of the branches, and when I got up in the stand and it got light, I could tell that my shooting lanes were a lot tighter," Scott said. "I probably got up in the stand at 6:45; daylight was about 7:30.

"At about 7:15, I looked to my right and saw a big-horned deer. I saw him move, and I saw him for a couple of seconds in the lane before he got into the woods."

Scott feared that the buck was going to sneak behind the stand, where he couldn't get a shot and could barely see because of the thick undergrowth. His only chance, he said, was if the buck circled behind and crossed the shooting lane to his left, so he swiveled his seat in that direction and got ready.

"I got my gun up, but it was sort of damp that morning, and he wasn't making a lot of noise," he said. "The next thing I knew, I saw him about 15 yards in front of me, in the shooting lane, with his head down, eating acorns. He never looked up."

Scott put the crosshairs on the buck's boiler room and drilled him with a single shot from his Remington .30-06. The buck stumbled off 20 feet before crashing to the ground.

"I was going to work later that morning, and I was checking my emails about 3 minutes before he showed up," Scott said. "I had even told my son that I wasn't gonna pull the trigger unless it was a really nice deer. So when I shot, he texted me right away: 'Heck, yeah!'"

With help from a neighboring landowner, Scott and his son got the buck out of the woods, and he was at work by 10 a.m. ■



Randy Parker of New Hill, N.C., caught this 9-pound, 11-ounce bass from Jordan Lake on Jan. 15.

DEADLINE FOR SC LOTTERY TURKEY HUNTS IS CLOSING IN

The S.C. Department of Natural Resources is accepting applications for wild turkey lottery hunts on public lands for a few more days, with the deadline being March 2 at 5 p.m.

Lottery hunts are planned this spring for Donnelly, Bonneau Ferry, Belfast and Santee Cooper WMAs.

A non-refundable fee of \$5 is required of all applicants for the Multi-site Turkey Lottery Hunt and a \$5 fee for the youth applicant on the Youth Multi-site Turkey Hunt.

After the selection process occurs, only the primary applicant will receive email notification of the drawing's completion.

In addition to the required hunting license, big game permit, and WMA permit, all turkey hunters, including youth, are required to have turkey tags in possession while hunting. Tags may be purchased on-line, by phone or at license vendors and will be mailed beginning in mid-February. Tags will also be available over the counter at SCDNR regional offices starting in late February.

For lottery information or questions contact:

Emily Kearse at 803-734-3887 or kearse@dnr.sc.gov, or Trista Milhouse at 803-734-3892 or milhouset@dnr.sc.gov. ■



BIG CAN OF TUNA FISH

Al Morris Jr., 15, of Atlantic Beach, N.C., was on the rod when this 876-pound bluefin tuna, the largest caught out of Morehead City, N.C., this season, hooked up on a trolled ballyhoo in 40 feet of water on Jan. 16. The fish was 101 inches long. Morris (far right) was fishing on the *Sea Dragn*, which is owned by his father, Capt. Al Morris, and mate Jeff Clark.

QUAIL GROUPS SIGN UP TO WORK FOR BOBWHITES

Quail restoration efforts in South Carolina improved recently when the 28 partners who make up the South Carolina Quail Council agreed to work together to help bring back the "prince of gamebirds."

"Quail restoration is one of the greatest conservation challenges we have ever faced because of the large-scale changes in land use that have rendered many thousands of acres unsuitable, or at least only marginally suitable, for these birds," said Robert Boyles, interim director of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. "There are 15 to 20 or more other species of birds with the same population declines as quail, and pollinators like butterflies and bees are being impacted by loss of this type habitat as well. We are very grateful to all of the partners for recognizing the scope of the task at hand and being willing to help."

The South Carolina Quail Council is a multi-organizational task force composed



of the leaders of 28 state and federal agencies, non-governmental conservation organizations and private landowners. It is chaired by the SCDNR director and serves to provide advocacy for habitat restoration for bobwhite quail and other wildlife species with similar habitat requirements,

through the South Carolina Bobwhite Initiative. The Quail Council helps coordinate agency and organization efforts.

The final signatures have been obtained on a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the partners that make up the South Carolina Quail Council.

"Every partner involved in the Quail Council has a unique set of skills or resources to contribute to restoration of quail in South Carolina," Boyles said. "While this MOA does not bind any of the partners to anything specific, it does affirm the willingness of all involved to pull together to address the declining trend in bobwhites and similar species."

The South Carolina Bobwhite Initiative is part of the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, the 25-state unified strategy for restoring wild quail. That strategy can be explored at these websites: www.scbobwhites.org and www.bringbackbobwhites.org. ■

NC BLUEFISH LIMIT CUT TO 3

Recreational fishermen in North Carolina have seen the daily creel limit cut for yet another popular saltwater species, this time bluefish.

Effective Feb. 1 in coastal waters from Maine to Florida, recreational fishermen can keep only three bluefish per day, unless they are fishing from a charter boat or other vessel involved in a for-hire operation. Those anglers can keep five bluefish per day.

No minimum size will be in effect.

Before the regulation change, North Carolina fishermen were allowed to keep 15 bluefish per day, but no more than five greater than 24 inches (total length).

The change in regulations has been mandated by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council and South Atlantic Fisheries Management Councils to reduce the coastwide recreational harvest by 28.6% to prevent exceeding the 2020 recreational harvest limit.

South Carolina has not made the change official in its state waters yet.

The latest stock assessment determined that bluefish are overfished, but overfishing is not occurring. ■

New artificial reef gets first structure: a tugboat

North Carolina's newest artificial reef, AR-165, has received its first piece of structure, an 88-foot tugboat.

AR-165, which is about 7 miles south of the Oregon Inlet sea buoy off Dare County, is scheduled to receive two more tugs and 7,000 tons of concrete pipe. The construction of the reef was organized by the Oregon Inlet Artificial Reef Committee, funded by a Coastal Recreational Fishing License grant and a donation from TW's Bait and Tackle in Nags Head.

Reef building will continue through the early spring.

The towing vessel *American* was built in 1951 and has gone through several ownership and name changes before it was retired from service in 2012 and cleaned of environmental pollutants before being sunk on Jan. 27. The top of the tug is approximately 30 feet below the surface. GPS coordinates for the reef are 35 41.672N/75 26.313W.

Plans are to sink a 104-foot tug and a 110-foot tug, then the concrete pipe in early spring.

The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries maintains 68 artificial reefs along North Carolina's coast. The reefs are typically built to promote marine life in areas with a generally featureless bottom. In North Carolina, they serve as crucial spawning and foraging habitat for many commercially and recreationally important fish species. ■

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BIG OUTDOOR SHOWS ARRIVE THIS MONTH

The Carolinas' two biggest outdoors shows are on tap in the next few weeks, offering sportsmen the opportunity to compare big bucks and spend plenty of money.

The Dixie Deer Classic, North Carolina's premier outdoor show, will return for its three-day run on the N.C. State Fairgrounds in Raleigh Feb. 28-March 1. The Palmetto Sportsmen's Classic arrives March 27-29 on the S.C. State Fairgrounds in Columbia.

The Dixie Deer Classic will feature the annual big-buck contest, with deer scored and competing in a number of different divisions.

Hours for the show are 11 a.m.-8 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 28, 9 a.m.-7 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 29, and 9 a.m.-5 p.m. on Sunday, March 1.

Special guests at the show include outdoor TV favorite Jim Shockey and Team Bone Collector.

A Carolina Dock Dogs competition, along with the Tar Heel Open turkey calling championship and the Southeastern Call Makers Competition.

Hours for the Palmetto Sportsmen Classic are noon to 8 p.m. on Friday, March 27, 9 a.m.-7 p.m. on Saturday, March 28, and 11 a.m.-6 p.m. on Sunday, March 29.

The S.C. Department of Natural Resources will score white-tailed deer antlers all three days for the state record book. Also for deer hunters, the Whitetails of North America Collection will be on



Brian Cope

The Dixie Deer Classic crowns the biggest bucks taken last season in North Carolina and surrounding states.

display. It includes the world-record typical and non-typical bucks: the Milo Hanson buck and the Missouri Monarch, as well as 8 of the top 10 bucks in the Boone & Crockett Club's record book.

The Hawg Trough, a mobile, 5,000-gallon fish tank will be on hand and will be used for fishing demonstrations and seminars.

In addition, the 2020 S.C. Duck Calling Competition will be held on Sunday, March 29, with the state championship, junior championship and Champion of Champions contest scheduled. ■

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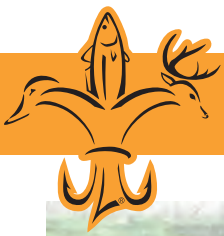
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Arliss Levi

Arliss Levi, 11, killed his first black bear last fall on his father's birthday. He dropped the 250-pound bruin in its tracks with a single shot from his mother's .308. The bear was killed in Henderson County, N.C.



Tommy Hardison

Tommy Hardison of Williamston, N.C., caught this big bull red last fall.



Keith Wynn

Keith Wynn caught this nice speckled trout last August near Folly Beach, S.C.



Mark Malloy

Mark Malloy had a great start to North Carolina's early duck season last October in Rockingham County.



Bryan Milliken

Bryan Milliken caught this 8.53-pound flounder last year around Carolina Beach, N.C.



Bill Ball

Bill Ball of Yorktown, Va., killed this nice gobbler last spring in Sussex County, Va.

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

Spring brings renewed interest in bass fishing throughout the Carolinas, and lakes and rivers are excellent choices for early action. But fishing in ponds explodes in March, and huge bass, along with great action, exist across both states.

To be consistently successful, targeting bass in ponds is much more complex than simply walking the bank, casting bottom-bumping or topwater lures. While that approach can be effective, anglers can score bigger and more bass with a good pond-fishing game plan.

Chuck Porter, retired active duty and civilian employee from Shaw Air Force Base near Sumter, S.C., has

developed a successful pond-fishing strategy in recent years; he formulates a strategic plan for every pond he fishes.

“Fishing ponds is relaxing and fun,” Porter said, “but I also like to catch lots of bass, especially big bass. I’ve learned that applying principles I’ve long employed on lakes has dramatically increased the number of bass — and big bass — caught.

But sometimes, the top spots on ponds can be subtle and more difficult to distinguish.”

Porter learned that every pond, while unique in physical makeup, shares the tendency to repeatedly produce bass from specific spots.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE >

LEARN THE INS AND OUTS OF POND FISHING AND HELP YOURSELF TO SOME OF THE BEST BASS ACTION IN THE CAROLINAS.

■ By Terry Madewell

SMALL WATERS,

BIG BASS

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

“I typically fish from the shore, but it’s not random fishing,” he said. “I start learning everything I can from the first trip to a pond and add to my data base on subsequent trips. Every pond has unique features where bass tend to congregate, and some are obvious physical features such as heavy brush, visible stumps and heavy vegetative growth. But many of the top targets are very subtle, often only found by slowly working a bottom-bumping bait around the pond.”

Porter bumps the bottom with a plastic worm as he patiently patrols the bank, and while feeling for the “thump” of a bass, he’s tuned in to what he feels on the bottom. He distinguishes soft or weedy bottoms from firm bottom. He’ll “feel” for unseen stumps, logs and, best of all, depressions. All of these — and any feature unique to a specific pond — are potentially recurring bass hideouts.

“I also target, inflow or outflow drains, as well as areas with a steep slope,” he said. “One rule of thumb is the deepest water is usually near the pond dam, so that’s usually a prime area to fish. But if a deeper hole exists elsewhere, that’s a prime target on every trip.”

Anytime he catches a bass at a specific spot, he tries to identify why that fish was holding there.

“When I can answer that question, I use that information to help me find other similar spots, often with positive results,” he said.

Porter arms himself with at least a couple of rod-and-reel combos with different lures and/or sizes, enabling him to make long casts into the interior of the ponds.

“On several ponds I fish some of my most productive spots are those well off the shoreline, found while searching for potential targets,” he said. “As I would on a lake, I’ll triangulate with reference points for finding those hidden targets. These are big bass magnets.”



March is one of the best months in the Carolinas for catching trophy largemouths, no matter what size the water you’re fishing is. **BACKGROUND:** A small boat opens up areas of a pond or small lake that often can’t be reached by a fisherman standing on and casting from the bank.

Terry Madewell

BOATS ADD OPTIONS

Pond fishing is multi-layered, and shoreline fishing is but one layer that anglers should consider. Getting on the pond in a boat further enhances fishing opportunities.

Who better than a guide on the Santee Cooper lakes to put lake-fishing logic into pond-fishing success? Kevin Davis, a veteran guide, also fishes and guides for largemouth bass on ponds only a short distance from the big lakes.

“Pond fishing for bass has always been a love of mine, and although fishing from the shoreline is enjoyable, my preference is to fish from a boat,” Davis said. “Often, the very best spots are out of range for shoreline anglers, even those with elite casting ability. But a boat enables me to more effectively fish all sizes of ponds and take pond bass-fishing to another level.”

Davis has honed his pond-fishing skills since he was a youngster and has used much the skills learned in ponds to become a better lake fisherman. He’s the co-owner of Pine Bluff Outdoorsman’s Club near Summerville, S.C., which consists of five ponds between 6 and 15 acres on prime Edisto River frontage.

“The diversity and size of the Pine Bluff ponds and proximity

to Santee Cooper enables me to guide for bass and teach others how to most effectively fish ponds,” said Davis (843-312-3080), who said the most-productive water is often out of casting range on large ponds; using a boat affords him the opportunity to fish the shoreline and any other targets he finds from multiple angles, just as he would on a lake.

“I’ll fish perpendicular to the shoreline when that’s the best, but when needed, I’ll work at a 45-degree or 30-degree angle,” he said.

Davis said this flexibility of positioning a boat enables him to work multiple lures, including crankbaits, spinnerbaits and topwaters, more effectively. In places where shoreline cover is heavy, he can approach in ultimate stealth mode, using only a sculling paddle, and he can fish weedy edge lines without having to cast over obstructions from the shoreline.

“Fishing via a boat simply offers more opportunities to find and catch bass on larger ponds,” he said. “Pond fishing is different than the big lakes in that the size of the water fished is scaled down, but the size of the bass is not downsized. Ponds produce prodigious bass, and while productive year-round, the early spring ranks high because ponds typically warm up faster than lakes, and trophy bass are active earlier.”

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SMALL WATERS, **BIG BASS**

Chuck Porter shows off a nice brace of bass caught fishing from the shoreline of a productive pond.



LEARN A POND'S SCHEDULE

Davis said anglers with access to multiple ponds have an edge because the size, depths and water sources for different ponds impact how quickly they warm in the spring. With a little planning, anglers can time fishing trips on different ponds, so as one ponds slows on big-fish potential, another may be approaching peak fishing.

“During the spring, when weather conditions can change so quickly, anglers can also enjoy short but productive trips to a pond and fish around unsettled weather, but get to safety quickly when warranted,” he said.

Lures for pond fishing are as varied as for big-lake fishing. Porter typically prefers plastic worms and employs both light-weight, finesse rigs along with larger worms rigged with a 3/16-ounce bullet weight for longer casts. On most ponds, he finds opportunities for spinnerbaits and topwater lures as well.

Davis said he can more effectively fish crankbaits from a boat because he can cast to the shoreline and work the bait from shallow to deep water. He also improves his topwater options for shoreline cover and open-water targets. Changing how his boat is positioned enables him to effectively employ most traditional bass lures based on the individual situation.

“Fishing from a boat affords the ability to uses specific lures to best work the specific fishing situations, and that usually improves the success rate,” he said. “One favorite example is

skipping a lure deep into a brushy hole where big bass often hide — I typically can't do that from the shoreline.” ■

SONAR FOR BIG PONDS >



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



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SMALL WATERS, **BIG BASS**

SONAR FOR BIG PONDS

Fishing from a full-sized bass boat is not an option at every pond, but guide Kevin Davis has some ponds that will accommodate his big boat.

"Access is the biggest issue, but where I can, I'll use my big boat, simply because, on big ponds, electronics are a key to success," he said. "Boat size is not important on ponds, but using electronics, even inexpensive electronics on a small boat, is a game-changer in terms of finding and catching bass.

"I can learn more about the productive places in a pond using sonar units in a couple hours than I could with multiple days of simply fishing with rod and reel," he said.

Davis said many ponds have depressions, humps and even old creek beds or ditches submerged and hidden from view that are tremendous big bass-holding areas. These areas are easily identified with electronics and often hold clusters of bass, just as they do on big lakes. They're typically not fished as much and offer the potential to hold more big bass.

"The larger the pond, the more likely the biggest bass are going to be further from the shoreline most of the time,"

Terry Madewell



This is the type of bottom topography that electronics, even from a small boat, can discover well away from the shoreline of a pond.

he said. "I often find bass shallow around mid-lake humps or weedbeds when fishing larger ponds, even when they're not active around the shoreline shallows.

"But on other days, the opposite occurs, and electronics help me quickly find the sweet spots. Using electronics on a pond enables me to find fish, experiment and determine the productive pattern for that day much quicker. And we spend a lot more time catching bass than hunting for them." ■

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MARCH IS A BIG TRANSITION MONTH FOR BASS IN WATERS ACROSS THE CAROLINAS. WATCH THE WEATHER AND THE WATER AND LOAD YOUR LIVWELL.

■ By Brian Cope

March is a big transition month

for bass and bass anglers in the Carolinas.

Fish are heading to the shallows in prespawn mode, and depending on the weather, some will spawn before the end of the month. Some years, anglers will encounter prespawn, spawning, and even post-spawn bass this month.

That, plus the erratic weather that often occurs, can make bass fishing in March a challenge. It can also make it very rewarding, with some of the biggest bass of the year biting for a variety of reasons.

Brett Collins of Ridgeway, S.C., runs the Carolina Anglers Team Trail and the Carolinas Bass Classic tournament series, and he is an avid angler himself. He said March is one of his favorite months to fish, despite unpredictable weather.

"You really have to keep an eye on the weather this month. If you get a little warming trend for a few days in a row, the bass will be on fire," he said. "It will push some of them to go ahead and spawn, or at least head to shallow water to prepare for it."

In March, Collins said bass on just about any lake will spend a lot of time under docks on the main lake. He targets these fish and prefers to do it with a jig. He dresses his jigs with soft-plastic trailers, then skips them under docks. Instead of making one long cast that hits the water only when it lands, he makes the lure skip like a stone. This gets the jig moving low enough to get under the docks and fast enough to get far under them.

"If you're fishing on the outer fringes of the docks, or just a foot into them, you're missing the best fish. The bigger fish hide way under there. You'll catch some smaller ones on the outskirts, but it takes the right cast to pull the big ones out. They aren't going to come after your jig this time of year, so

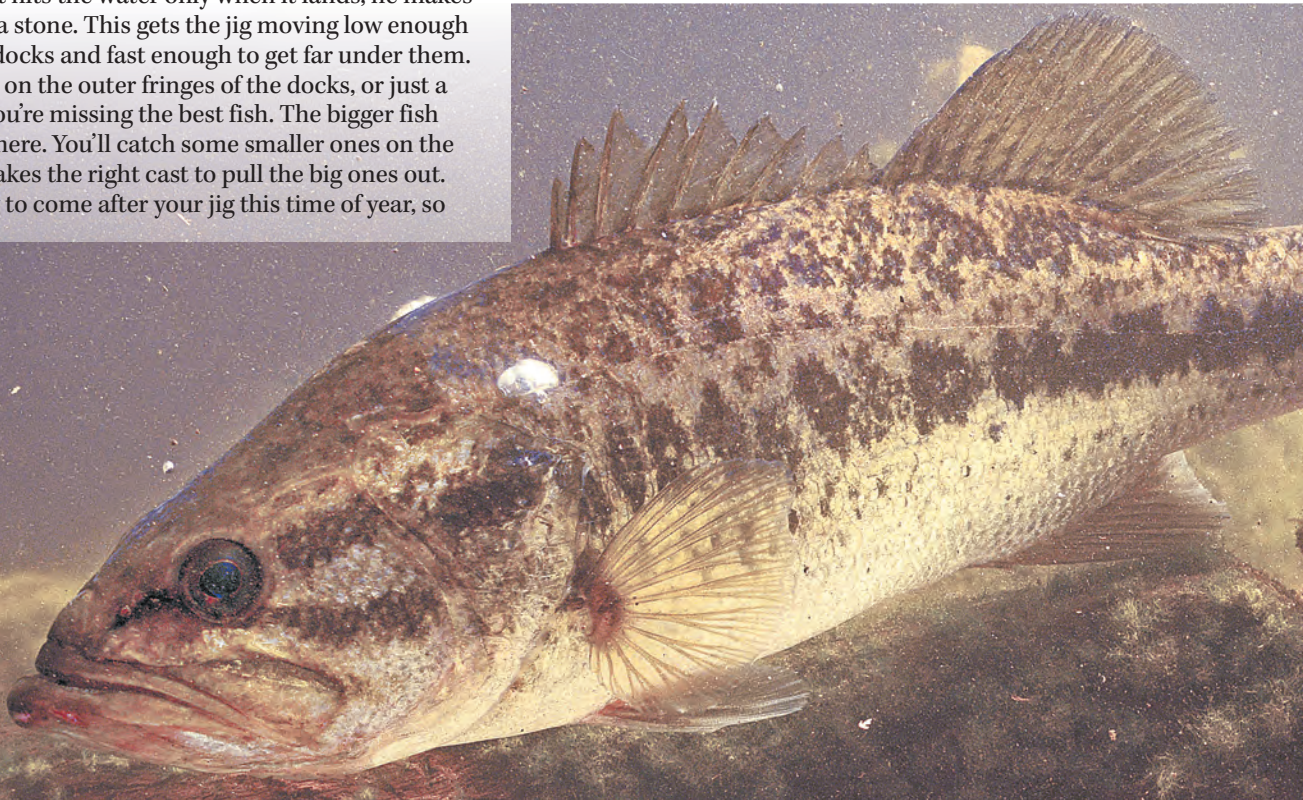
you have to put it right where they are," he said.

Collins said that no matter what the weather, you'll find some bass on main-lake docks throughout the month.

"Some of these are in prespawn mode," he said. "They're holding out, waiting for the right water temperature to go shallow and spawn. And some of them may have already spawned and are recovering before making their next move. The prespawn bass are a little tougher to catch. They are mainly concentrating on the water temperature and being where they need to be leading up to the spawn. But they will often bite if you put it right in their face. It's an easy meal that they can't resist."

Post-spawn fish can be easier to catch, he said, because spawning is behind them, and they need energy.

"The post-spawn bass are pretty worn out. Their bodies have been through a lot. They'll stop under the same docks to recover, rest and feed up. They can bite pretty aggressively and can make for some fun fishing," he said.



WATCH THE WEATHER

When watching the weather this month, Brett Collins said he hopes for three things: stained water, a little wind and a few nights in the 50s.

"Even when you have some 60-plus degree days, it doesn't usually help that much if it's dropping into the 40s at night. You want three or more nights in a row in the 50s. The water is usually stained in March, which is good, and some wind always helps. It helps concentrate baitfish — and the bass chasing them. And it also covers mistakes anglers make. It will have fish chasing noisy lures rather than being startled by them," he said.

Having some wind also offers anglers some good targets at which to cast. Any type of structure that can break the wind, no matter how small, is a good spot to cast. Bass will hide behind it to ambush prey that gets pushed in by the wind, and they will readily bite a well-placed lure.

"The worst thing to see in March is a blue-sky, calm day," Collins said. "I do want it to be relatively warm, but most of all, I want some wind, dirty water and high water. When fishing on days like that, find some reference points and start making casts. Eliminate the type of points they aren't biting on. You'll find out real quick what they're biting, and you'll catch your share." ■

Fishermen should target any kind of visible cover in March, because bass are using a lot of it to hide in ambush for baitfish and crawfish.



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Collins will work a dock thoroughly, but he said it's no place to spend all day. A few good casts that put his jig deep under the dock or under pontoon boats parked at a dock, and he moves on to the next one. At some point, a good fish will bite.

The weather plays a big factor in March, and one of the biggest factors is rain, as well as snow from north of us melting and filling the rivers that eventually flood our lakes. That's just what angler Michael Stephens of Charlotte, N.C., is looking for.

Stephens has won his share of bass tournaments, including the \$50,000 Carolinas Bass Classic on Lake Wylie a few years ago in March. The water was high then — the kind of conditions in which he excels.

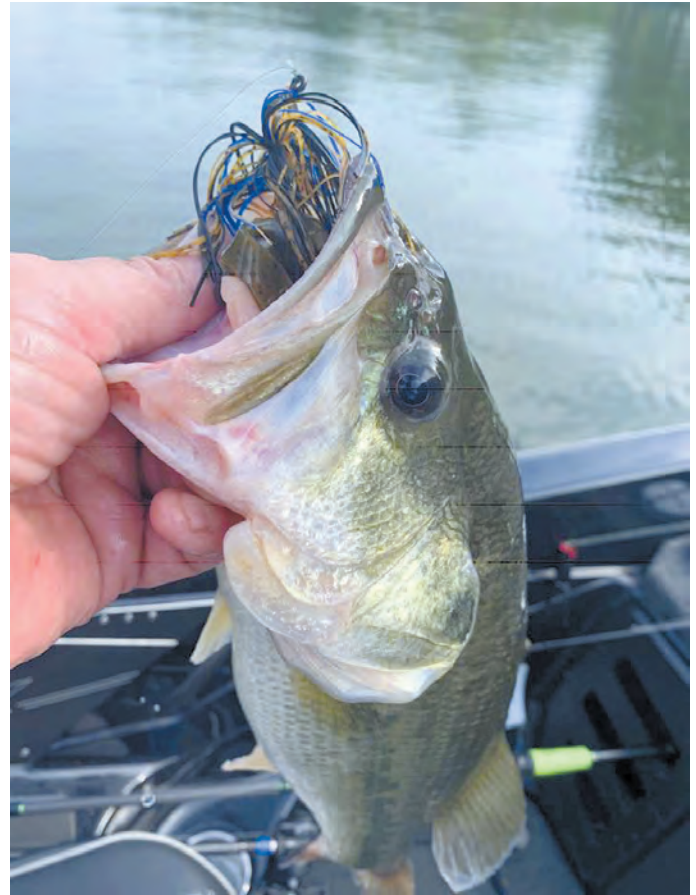
“These fish have it in their minds that they need to get shallow,” he said. “Some will stage at the mouths of creeks just waiting on the temperature to drop enough for them to make their move. They'll be scattered out when conditions are normal, just waiting. But when the high water sets in, they get real predictable.”



Stephens said sudden flooding makes bass react similar to how humans react when the power goes out in their homes at nighttime.

“No matter where you're standing when the power goes out and it gets dark, you've got a map in your head of the way your house is laid out. And the first thing most people do is feel for a wall or counter top to guide them. They want a reference point,” he said.

Likewise, when bass are waiting to head shallow to spawn, sudden flooding will push them to a reference point. They know they still have to head shallow soon, so they'll find a reference point like a rock wall, a dock, or even the bank to hold close to while they wait on the weather to get just right.



ABOVE: With crawdads being a big source of protein for prespawn bass in March, many anglers rely on jigs as their primary weapons. **LEFT:** Michael Stephens loves to catch bass when water levels rise in lakes, he says, because bass movements become predictable.

“During high water, most people think the bass get real spread out, but the opposite is actually true. They'll hold real tight to cover when the water gets high, just like a person will stay close to something familiar in the dark during a power outage,” he said.

Under those conditions, Stephens said he will cast crankbaits, double-bladed spinnerbaits, Chatterbaits, and ½-ounce jigs with trailers.

“Most people call it ‘junk fishing,’ and I'll cast tight to rock walls, main-lake docks, and banks — even the banks in deep water areas. On most days, one of those four lure types will work. Once I start getting bit, I'll continue to target the same areas with whatever lure is working,” he said. ■



Brian Cope of Edisto Island, S.C., the web editor for CarolinaSportsman.com, is a retired U.S. Air Force combat communications technician. He 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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The author had a huge couple of days last March on Lake Hartwell, testing his flat-sided crankbaits on big bass.

LUNKER LINES

David Fritts

AN OLD APPROACH, A NEW BAIT FOR MARCH

David Fritts

I have always loved bass fishing in March in the Carolinas, and I've got an extra reason to like it this year: a new lure that fits perfectly in the conditions.

Bass fishing depends on the weather to some extent, because in March, it can be cool, or downright cold. The water temperature is typically in the low- to mid-50s. I know that anytime you see the water get up to, say, 58 to 60 degrees, that's a good sign that you need to be winding something: a crankbait, a spinnerbait, even swimming a worm or a jig.

Jerkbaits are always productive lures in March when bass start to stir, because they aren't always sitting on the bottom around structure. They will come up out of deeper water to hit baits that are over their heads, and that's where jerkbaits and certain kinds of crankbaits really come into play.

Some of those newer crankbaits bear

my name — Berkley's Frittsides baits — and I can't imagine fishing in March without them.

We tried to design this bait off the old Steve Blazer flat-sided bait but make it better. We did some things, like using disc weights in the bellies, and put the rear hooks right behind the bait to make it a little more weedless. They worked out great. It's a plastic bait, but it's solid and thick, so it throws like a wooden bait. Most of the time, throwing flat-sides is aggravating, but you can throw this one a long way.

THREE OPTIONS

Depending on how deep the fish are you're targeting, you either use the No. 5, No. 7 or No. 9 models. The No. 5 is the smallest; it runs 5 to 6 feet deep, and it is totally different from the other two. It has a tremendous amount of roll. It thumps almost like a big spinnerbait

blade thumping, but it's a crankbait. The No. 7 runs 7 to 8 feet deep, and I fish the No. 9 in 10 feet of water. The No. 7 and No. 9 have actions that are different from the No. 5. They have a side-to-side motion, not a swimming motion. It's almost like a shimmy.

I will fish a No. 5 anywhere you can fish a square-billed bait. It will come over top of grass, run next to letdowns. It's a shallow-water bait. You're throwing it more at targets than the deeper-running baits. I think it's better to throw it on my 6-foot-8 or 7-foot Lew's cranking rod. I will fish the No. 7 and No. 9 on a 7-foot-6 or 7-foot-9 cranking rod. You put



David Fritts is a 63-year-old pro bass fisherman from Lexington, N.C. He won the 1993 Bassmasters Classic championship and the 1997 FLW Tour Championship, and he was the 1994 BASS Angler of the Year. He is sponsored by Ranger boats, Evinrude outboards, Lewis, Minnkota, Lowrance and Berkley.

a Lew's BB-1 reel with a 5.1-to-1 retrieve ratio, and I spool on 10-pound Sensation mono, which is optimal for any crankbait. Fluorocarbon has too much stretch.

BASS STRIKE UP

How deep you fish often depends on how far fish will come up to get it. If fish get on the kinds of patterns they do on Lake Murray, Lake Gaston or Lake Norman in March, where they'll come up 5 to 8 feet to get a bait, you can throw a No. 7 or No. 9 over deeper water, or you can bump stumps with it. When I was testing the bait, I caught seven fish over 8 pounds in two days on Lake Hartwell last March, right before they went on the beds. I was sitting in a channel in 25 feet of water, throwing up on the flat, and the big fish would follow it back and hit it right at the boat before they hit it.

Most of the time, I have to make a crankbait hustle when I'm retrieving it, but when I was testing these baits, I'd catch fish winding much slower than normal. When you wind it slowly or medium-slow, you sort of get that side-to-side jerkbait action.

There are a handful of colors I really like in March: honey shad, spicy mustard, Kentucky blue, misty clear and red craw. But to tell you the truth, the action is so strong, I don't know if the colors play as big a role. ■

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SUZUKI MARINE

Guide Joel Munday catches plenty of big bass in March on Falls of Neuse Lake, where bass are moving into prespawn areas.

FALLS OF NEUSE BASS

slide into prespawn mood in March

Joel Munday of Outdoors Expeditions Guide Service said Falls of the Neuse Lake north of Raleigh and Durham is one of the best lakes in North Carolina for tangling with huge, prespawn staging bass.

When water temperatures range from the 50s to the low 60s, the bass begin staging at main-lake and secondary rocky points near their spawning grounds.

"The fish will stage in 12 feet of water or less before warmer temperatures urge them to move into the creeks to spawn," said Munday (919-669-2959). "Target points near deep water."

Munday said Falls has plenty of staging points scattered across its 12,410 acres, but if he could fish only one stretch, it would be from New Light Creek upstream to I-85. The area around I-85 area becomes shallow and treacherous; anglers should navigate with care.

Munday cranks for staging bass with his go-to bait, a crawdad-colored No. 7 Shad Rap, fished on a medium-action 13 Fishing baitcasting outfit spooled with 12-pound fluorocarbon.

"It's a bait that can be retrieved slowly for sluggish, cold-water bass yet allows the fisherman to cover a lot of water," Munday said. "I keep the bait in contact with the bottom to make it deflect off of rocks and stumps. When the bait deflects, that's when most of the strikes occur. Rocky points are best in early March; stumpy places are good later in March."

Munday also slow-rolls 3/8- and 1/2-ounce spinnerbaits around rocky structure. He favors Dave's Tournament Tackle spinnerbaits in white/chartreuse with double willow-leaf blades for clear water or with



Outdoor Expeditions Guide Service

Colorado blades for dingy water. For fishing grass clumps, he switches to a Z-Man Chatterbait in white/chartreuse of green pumpkin.

When using spinnerbaits and Chatterbaits, he switches to a medium/heavy rod and a reel filled with 15-pound fluorocarbon.

If Falls becomes flooded this month, Munday flips shallow cover with Texas-rigged creature baits or jigs with creature-bait trailers. Color choices include green pumpkin and peanut butter and jelly in clear water or black/blue in stained water.

"The warmer the water gets, the further back in the creeks the bass will move," Munday said.

Flipping dictates a medium/heavy to heavy action rod and 17- to 20-pound fluorocarbon.

Munday said current is of little importance. Neither is water color unless it's fresh, muddy water, which hurts the fishing.

The best days are sunny ones with a light breeze behind a warming trend. The worst days are those with strong, cold March winds howling across the lake. ■

— Tony Garitta

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JORDAN LAKE BASS are on the move earlier than anglers think

Although March bass fishing on North Carolina's B. Everett Jordan Lake will be strongly weather-dependent, fish will be poised to move up from winter holding areas to prespawn transition zones as soon as possible.

And that, according to angler Jonathan Phillips of Pittsboro, N.C., could be sooner than anglers think.

"We've always thought that 55 degrees was the magic number for bass to move back into the creeks," Phillips said. "But they'll be back there at 49 to 52 degrees, and you can catch them. The water temperature is important, but not as much as the length of daylight."

Phillips will begin searching in the first two-thirds of the creeks, giving preferential treatment to those upstream of the US 64 bridge, believing them to turn on faster. He targets secondary points and red clay/rock outcroppings. Of these, he considers those closest to deep water to be the most productive because they allow bass to move vertically instead of horizontally during cold fronts. Anglers may be casting into a foot or two of water from a boating sitting in 15 to 20 feet.

"If the water is below 52 degrees, I'm throwing a No. 7 Shad Rap," said Phillips. "It's balsa bait with a very subtle action, and they really like it when it's cold. I'll use any type of brown, yellow, red, or the original craw color and take a piece of Scotch Brite and knock the clear coat off it. I'll use a stop-and-go retrieve, varying the times of the stop, and remember which interval I get bit on."

"As the water gets up to 54 to 55 degrees, they'll bite a spinnerbait pretty good and a Chatterbait as well. They'll bite a lipless crankbait or some kind of square bill. I prefer a ¼-ounce Luhr Jensen Speed Trap in the crystal craw color and throw it on a 7-foot JB Custom Rods medium cranking rod with a Lews reel spooled up with 12-pound fluorocarbon."

Another productive March technique is fishing riprap with an Alabama rig. The rocks are an excellent source of heat, and most are near deep water access for sudden cold snaps. He prefers a 5-wire style rigged with white Keitech swimbaits on ⅛-ounce jigheads with light-wire hooks that can be pulled free from the rocks on 20-pound fluorocarbon. While many productive riprap areas can be found along causeways back in creeks, this scenario brings the main-lake back into play, especially the US 64 causeway where a number of 10- and 11-pounders have been caught in March. ■

— Dusty Wilson



Angler Jonathan Phillips believes Jordan Lake bass move up and back into the creeks a bit before most anglers think they do.



DECOY SETUPS ARE BECOMING A BIGGER PART OF TURKEY HUNTERS' TACTICS AS THEY LOOK FOR SOME EDGE IN THE PURSUIT OF MR. TOM.

Tom Foolery

By Mike Marsh

Rick Small

With wild turkeys becoming wiser by the season, hunters are looking for anything that can give them a bit of an edge.

To take smart, old birds, some South Carolina hunters have turned to using decoys of various forms in different setups to lure old birds close enough for a sure shot.

Matt Fields of Chapin, S.C., a 34-year-old K9 officer with the Lexington County Sheriff's Department, is member of Avery Outdoor Products' pro staff who has been hunting turkeys for 20 years. His 88-year-old grandfather, Roy Fields, once hunted turkeys on family property now part of the Savannah River nuclear plant site and Crackerneck WMA. Randy Lambert, 66, of Barnwell, SC., worked for the USDA Farm Services Agency in Barnwell and Allendale counties before retiring. He has taken about 150 gobblers since he began hunting turkeys in 1979.

With turkey season in parts of South Carolina opening in March, Roy Fields teamed up with Lambert, and Matt Fields carried a visitor on an early season hunt in Barnwell County. "We have some new decoys to test," said Matt Fields, who well before daylight set out Avery's Green Head Jekyll & Hide gobbler decoy, along with an Upright Jake and Upright Hen decoy. "They are so lifelike, it looks like they will start walking around, clucking, gobbling and strutting at any second."



Matt Fields dropped this gobbler as it paraded in front of his gobbler decoy in Barnwell County, S.C.

Carolinas turkey seasons

SOUTH CAROLINA

Private lands, Game Zone 1 and 2: April 1–May 10

Private lands, Game Zone 3 and 4: March 22–April 30

WMA lands statewide: April 1–May 5

Some WMAs may be more restrictive, see Spring Turkey Seasons on WMAs for specified hunt dates.

Limits:

Residents: 3 gobblers per season, no more than one per day, no more than one (1) from April 1-10 on private land and WMAs in Game Zones 1 & 2. No more than one (1) from March 22-31 on private land in Game Zone 3 & 4.

Nonresidents: 2 gobblers per season, no more than one per day, no more than one (1) from April 1-10 on private land and WMAs in Game Zones 1 & 2. No more than one (1) from March 22-31 on private land in Game Zone 3 & 4.

Some WMAs may be more restrictive.

NORTH CAROLINA

Youth Season (under 18): Apr. 4–10

Regular Season: Apr. 11–May 9

Limits:

One bearded bird per day, two per season.

Mike Marsh

Lambert headed to a creek bottom where turkeys had been roosting, hunting 1,000 yards up the creek from where Matt Fields set up his decoys in an open stand of hardwoods that gradually sloped toward the creek.

It wasn't long before several turkeys gobbled from their roosts. Matt Fields wooed them with a friction call, and about 30 minutes later, two jakes came to the decoys, gobbling all the way. They worked the jake decoy the most, but also came within a few feet of the hen decoy before they lost interest and left. They stayed away from the gobbler decoy.

The next day, Matt Fields set up the same decoys in the same spot. At 7:30 a.m., a gobbler fired up behind him. He took a circuitous route of 600 yards, responding to calls, before he finally came close enough to see the decoys. Uphill and behind the decoys, he strutted, drummed and gobbled for more than 30 minutes. Eventually, he came downhill — unusual behavior for a tom. Convinced the decoys were real, he alternately trotted and strutted right up, and “got in the face” of the aggressive, “Hyde” side of the decoy. He fell to a single shot.

“After moving around where he could see both sides, he homed in on the Hyde side,” Matt Fields said. “He made his choice, took his chances and lost. He’s a big gobbler, too.”

The gobbler weighed 18½ pounds, had a 10-inch and a 7-inch beard and sported a pair of 1½-inch spurs.

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SETUPS >**

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SURE-FIRE DECOY SETUPS

• **Gobbler-Jake-Hen.** This classic setup is made even sexier with the Jekyll & Hyde tom decoy, which sits on a plastic stake that allows it to turn slowly in the breeze, showing both sides of its face: the dominant red Hyde face and the subdued blue/white Jekyll face. An aggressive gobbler is more likely to approach the Hyde face, and a subordinate gobbler more likely to approach the Jekyll face. An approaching gobbler often circles a setup. Therefore, if the decoy is not rotating, the gobbler should still spot the decoy face that provides the most stimulus and move in close.

The hen decoy provides a powerful attraction. However, in this setup, the gobbler decoy incites a dominance instinct, and the jake decoy invokes jealousy. Using only a lone hen decoy can backfire on the hunter, because a gobbler desires the hen to approach him as he displays: gobbling, strutting, dragging his wing tips and spreading his fan. Adding the two male decoys helps to ensure that an approaching gobbler does not hang up beyond shotgun range.

• **Gobbler-Receptive Hen.** Avery's Laydown Hen decoy can either appear as a hen that is simply resting or dusting or one that is receptive to breeding. The difference is as simple as adding a gobbler decoy.

Positioning the gobbler decoy directly behind the hen shows she is ready and willing to mate. A dominant gobbler approaching this setup may come in at a dead run. If the hunter is calling, and a gobbler is answering then suddenly goes silent, it's time to get ready to slip off the safety button.

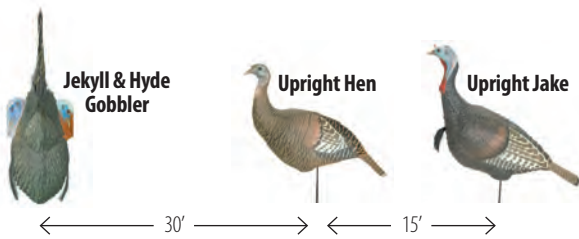
• **Jake-Hen.** The Upright Jake decoy paired with the Upright

The presence of a gobbler or jake decoy will bring out the dominance instinct of a long-beard, especially in the presence of a hen.

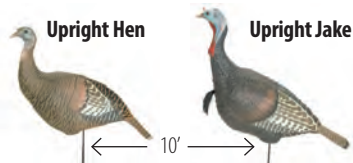


Rick Small

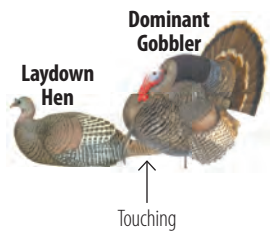
Three Sure-Fire Turkey Decoy Setups



Gobbler — Hen — Jake



Hen — Jake



Hen — Gobbler Breeding

Hen decoy is one of the simplest to set up as well as easiest to carry. Two full-bodied decoys are less cumbersome than three or more.

Another advantage is their use on public land or any land where other hunters whose location is unknown may be trying their luck. The jake decoy is not as likely to attract another hunter who may become overly excited and approach too close.

This setup also incites jealousy instincts in an adult gobbler. It may also attract one or more jakes. Even if the hunter has no desire to take a jake, a live jake moving in close, gobbling and displaying while working the decoys, adds tons of attraction.

• **Turkey Fans.** Real turkey mounts make excellent decoys. However, more often, hunters prefer the convenience of using the fans of male turkeys. The Jekyll & Hyde comes with a slot for its own folding artificial fan, but it can be made more attractive by inserting a real fan. A gobbler fan is a good choice, but a jake fan can provide even more attraction to jakes or subordinate gobblers.

While Lambert does not use any type of blind, he often hides behind a gobbler fan. A fan can also be set on a stake in a decoy setup or as a stand-alone attraction at a distance, but still well within shotgun range.

Lambert said has taken most of his turkeys by using fans.

“When a gobbler sees a fan, he’s usually going to respond in some way,” he said. ■



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

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■ By Dusty Wilson

MOVING-WATER CLABES

Joe Dennis

Anglers across the Carolinas are chomping at the bit for spring to arrive and with it, better fishing conditions —

none more than dedicated crappie fisherman.

While many will wait for the nearest reservoir to warm, two guides believe rivers fire up earlier and faster, spurring crappie to prespawn conditions and feeding time ahead of schedule.

A key difference concerning the water temperature in river systems is that the water's depth and breadth is less than a lake, resulting in faster warming. Not to mention that the current mixes the water on the surface — warmed by the sun — with the cooler water below. In addition, deeper water is close at hand in case of a cold snap, giving fish the courage to test the shallows a little earlier. While these conditions bring fish to the beds faster, our guides don't wait that long.

"You can catch fish on the bed in late February all the way up until the end of March in the rivers," said Joe Dennis, a Bonneau, S.C., resident who runs Captain J Hook Charters and fishes the Santee and Cooper river systems. "But I'm catching the biggest fish before they go on the actual bed. The bucks come in and make the nest, and the bigger females hang off in a little deeper water — that's where I'm catching them."

"I start catching most of my crappie when the water starts hitting 56 degrees and rising, and the bite on numbers of your 2-pound-plus fish is 60 to 64 degrees and rising."

But anglers will have to tinker with techniques to be successful due to the schematics of a river and moving water. Most are contained by steeper banks that prohibit typical spawning depths, pushing fish to bed in 4 to 10 feet of water, with the bigger females hanging on the first ledge beyond that. Fish will cling to cover,

which isn't unusual, but with the current it becomes a necessity — and that's a good thing.

"You're gonna find more fish congregated in the river," said Dennis (843-245-3762), whose show *Father and Son Outdoors TV* airs on the Pursuit Channel. "The current and that structure centers them in — in the lake, they tend to scatter. You can sometimes catch a limit around one little bush, stump or tree. I'm looking for bends and little eddies that have ledges and these individual pieces of cover in them. They're not going to be in the fast current."



In river systems, really big female crappie will begin to spawn when the water temperature hits 60 degrees.



Joe Dennis



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Having found a suitable site, Dennis fan-casts a lime or chartreuse, 1/2-ounce Rockport Rattler jighead with either a green/glitter or black/chartreuse grub. He counts it down to where he believes the top of the structure is and begins a slow retrieve. In the cooler water, the bite is light, so he uses a 4-pound Slime Line, a high-visibility monofilament, to notice the slightest takes.

An important note in the river system is the nearest adjoining reservoir. The rivers Dennis fishes are downstream from the dams that impound the Santee Cooper lakes, Marion and Moultrie, with saltwater farther downriver, meaning the fish he catches are residents of the river. On the other hand, guide Eddie Moody of Roxboro, N.C., fishes the Eno River near Durham, which flows into Falls of the Neuse Lake. While a certain percentage of Eno River crappie are likely residents, Moody, who runs Slab's Guide Service, believes that many follow shad upriver from the lake as the water cools in the fall, feed through the season, and spawn in early spring as river water temperatures reach a prespawn level before lake.

"The crappie are going to travel with the grocery store, with the shad," said Moody (984-363-5256), "and since the river is a smaller body of water, it's going to warm up faster. The feeding up process here might be 30 to 60 days earlier than in the lake."

Like Dennis, Moody starts catching fish when water temperatures reach the mid-50s, which is usually late February to March. This gives him a chance to catch fish ganged up on cover rather than seeking out bedding fish on the expansive spawning flats that rivers in low-lying areas like the Eno contain.

"If you wait until the water reaches 68 degrees, you've missed it," said Moody. "Looking for fish in the spawning areas is like looking for a needle in a haystack; there's just not a big con-

Crappie in black and white

The majority of crappie that anglers in the Carolinas catch from rivers will be black crappie, in part because the percentage of black crappie is higher than white crappie, but also because the two subspecies spawn at slightly different temperatures. With winter patterns in recent years proving that winter can become spring in a week's time, more and more anglers are seeing black and white crappie intermingling.

"Years ago, there was a gradual transition from winter to spring," said guide Eddie Moody of Roxboro, N.C., "but for the last couple of years, it's been like flipping a switch. It's 40 degrees one day and 60 the next. That's why the black and white crappie are coming in together. They used to come in 2 to 4 weeks apart, with the white crappie coming in first. The black crappie will travel in a suspended fashion, while the white crappie tend to relate more to the bottom."

According to the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission website, black crappie spawn at between 60 to 68 degrees, while white crappie spawn between 58 and 64 degrees.

That isn't the only difference between the two sets of slabs. Black crappie tend to spawn on gravel or soft, muddy bottoms, and white crappie are more likely to be found spawning near cover such as brush, stumps or rocks.

Although the most-distinguishable difference between the two is the vertical bars often found on the whites, water



Joe Dennis

Crappie in river systems may be as much as a month ahead of their reservoir brethren when it comes to their spawning activity.

centration. We like to run the drops on the edges of the river channel where the shallow flats are. In an area where the flat is 2 feet deep and the channel is 20, the bigger females will generally be in 8 to 12 feet, on the edge. We cover ground and look for areas that hold numbers, usually those with a row of stumps or some kind of cover on the drop. Then, we'll go back and work those areas."

Moody, a traditional long-line troller, uses this favored method to locate crappie hot spots. Taking advantage of active fish, he trolls minnow-tipped Bobby Garland Strollers and Road

Runners between 1 and 1.2 mph. When he encounters a good bite, he takes note of the area — not just the location, but the terrain and how high the cover reaches to the surface. Then, he returns to work the area over with jigs and slip-corked minnows.

Although the Santee, Cooper and Eno rivers are excellent models, they only scratch the surface of available moving water. North Carolina's Cape Fear, Flat, Trent, Neuse and Tar-Pamlico are good

crappie fisheries, as well as tributaries of the Albemarle Sound. The Waccamaw, Wateree, Congaree, Combahee and Ashpoo rivers are good moving-water crappie fisheries in South Carolina. ■



Dusty Wilson of Raleigh, N.C., is a lifelong outdoorsman. He is the manager of Tarheel Nursery in Angier, N.C., and can be followed on his blog at InsideNCFishing.com.



Dusty Wilson

White crappie can often be distinguished from black crappie by their dark, vertical bars, but counting dorsal spines is the only guaranteed way to tell them apart.

conditions can affect the fish's coloration and make them difficult to tell apart. The only way to be certain is to count the dorsal spines. Black crappie will have 7 to 8 spines; whites will have 5 to 6. ■

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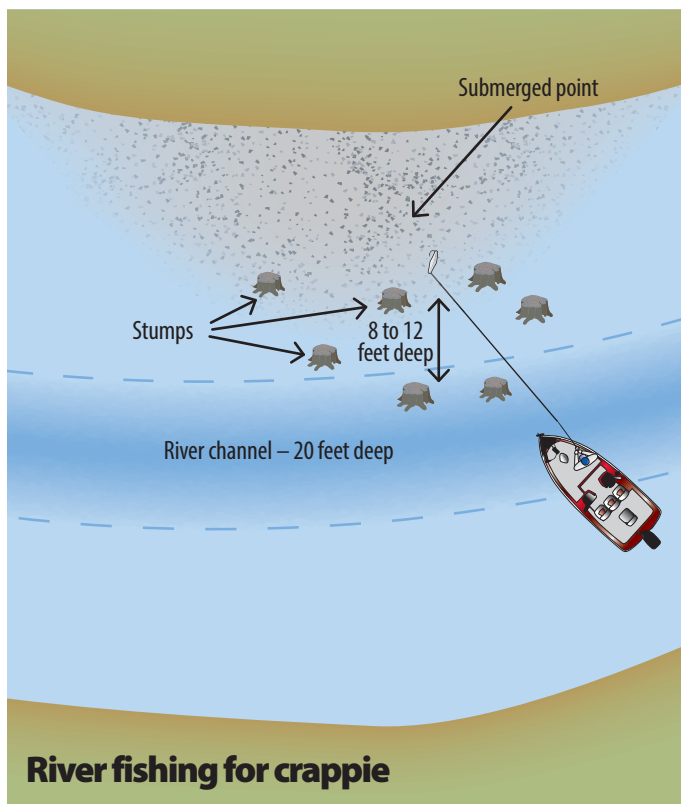
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SALTWATER

STATE COASTAL WATERS REGULATIONS (0 - 3 miles)

FISH SPECIES	Minimum Lengths	Creel Limit (per person)
Greater amberjack	28" FL	1/day
Blue marlin	99" LJFL	1/vessel/trip
White marlin	66" LJFL	1/vessel/trip
Sailfish	63" LJFL	1/day
Sharks	%	%
Cobia	33"	2/day
Bluefish	5 longer than 24" TL	15/day
Red drum (channel bass, puppy drum)	18" min., 27" max.	1/day
Black drum	14" min., 25" max.	10/day
Flounder	Closed	Closed
Dolphin (mahi-mahi)	none	10/day
Groupers (black and gag)	24" TL	1/day
Red, scamp, yellowfin, yellowmouth	20" TL	3/day
Speckled hind/Warsaw Grouper	closed	closed
Wahoo	none	2/day
Red porgy (aka silver snapper, pinky)	14" TL	3/day
King mackerel	24" FL	3/day
Spanish mackerel	12" FL	15/day
Sea bass (north of Hatteras)	12.5" TL	15/day
Sea bass (south of Hatteras)	13" TL	7/day
Yellowfin/Bigeye tuna	27" CFL	3/day
Bluefin tuna	Contact NMFS (http://www.nmfspermits.com)	
Spotted sea trout (speckled)	14"	4/day
Weakfish (gray trout)	12" TL	1/day
Snappers:	12" TL	10/day in federal waters
Gray (mangrove), yellowtail, queen, cubera, dog, mahogany, schoolmaster		
Sheepshead	10"	10/day
Red snapper	closed	closed
Mutton snapper	16" TL (federal waters)	10/day
Vermillion snapper	12" TL	5/day
Striped bass ^	28"-35" TL max (ocean)	1/day
Hickory shad	None	10/day
American shad	closed	closed

^ see NCWRC/NCDMF regs for inshore Management Area limits. % Contact NMFS Highly Migratory Species, 888-872-8862, visit [hmspermits.noaa](http://hmspermits.noaa.gov).

FRESHWATER

FISH Species (Inland waters)	Minimum Size Limit	Creel Limit (per day)
Crappie +	None +	None +
Largemouth, smallmouth, spotted bass +	14" (2-fish exception)	5
Channel catfish	No restrictions	None
Blue/Flathead catfish	No restrictions	None
Striped bass, hybrid (Bodie) %	20"	4 %
Sauger	15"	8
White bass	None	25
Walleye#	None	8
Muskellunge	42"	1
Kokanee salmon	None	7
Red drum	18" min., 27" max.	1
American and hickory shad	None	10 (1 American shad)
Spotted sea trout	14" min.	4
Flounder	Closed	Closed

TL=Total Length; LJFL=Lower jaw to middle of fork in tail; FL=Fork Length (tip of snout to middle of fork in tail); CFL=Curved Fork Length (measure of a line tracing contour of body from tip of upper jaw to fork of the tail)

+ See specific lake exceptions in NCWRC regulations digest or www.ncwildlife.org

% Striped bass creel limits and size minimums vary by lake. See NCWRC regulations digest or www.ncwildlife.org.

Lake James, minimum size is 15 inches. Lake Gaston, minimum size is 18 inches, creel limit 5.

@ Hook-and-line and flounder jiggers restricted to 4 fish per day per trip, 15-inch size minimum.

SALTWATER

STATE COASTAL WATERS REGULATIONS (0 - 3 miles)

FISH SPECIES	Minimum Lengths	Creel Limit (per person)
Greater amberjack	28" FL	1/day
Blue marlin	99" LJFL	1/day
White marlin	66" LJFL	1/day
Sailfish	63" LJFL	1/day
Sharks	%	%
Cobia	36" FL	1/day&
Bluefish	None	15/day
Black drum	14" minimum	
	27" maximum TL	5/day
Redfish (red drum, channel bass)	15" minimum	
	23" maximum TL	2/day
Flounder (state waters)	14" TL	10/day
Groupers (black and gag)	24" TL	1/day
Red, scamp, yellowfin, yellowmouth	20" TL	3/day
Speckled hind/Warsaw grouper	closed	closed
Red porgy (aka silver snapper, pinky)	14" TL	3/day#
King mackerel	24" FL	3/day
Spanish mackerel	12" FL	15/day
Sheepshead	14"	10/day (30 per boat)
Spadefish	None	20/day (agg. grouper)
Black sea bass	13"	7/day
Dolphin	20" FL	10/day (60 per boat)
Yellowfin tuna	27" CFL	3/day
Bluefin/Bigeye tuna	Contact NMFS (http://www.nmfspermits.com)	
Tarpon	77" FL	1/day
Spotted sea trout (speckled)	14"	10/day
Weakfish (gray trout)	12"	1/day
Wahoo	None	2/day
Gray, yellowtail, queen, cubera, dog, mahogany, schoolmaster snapper	12" TL	10/day#
Red snapper	closed	closed
Mutton snapper	16" TL (federal waters)	10/day
Vermillion snapper	12" TL	5/day

% For shark seasons, bag and size limits, contact NMFS Highly Migratory Species Division, 888-872-8862 or hmspermits.noaa.gov. # Check with the SAFMC at www.safmc.net or 843-571-4366. & Cobia, 1 per person per day up to 6 per boat. Closed May 1-31 south of Jeremy Inlet, 1 per person, up to 3 per boat, after June 1 south of Jeremy Inlet. # No more than 6 redfish per boat.

FRESHWATER

FISH Species (Inland waters)	Minimum Size Limit	Creel Limit (per day)
Crappie/Panfish +	None	30 bream (15 red-bream), 20 crappie
Largemouth, smallmouth, spotted, redeye, bass%	none largemouth 12" smallmouth	5 lg/sm/r, 15 spots
Channel catfish	No restrictions	None
Blue catfish	No restrictions=	None=
Flathead catfish	No restrictions	None
Striped bass or hybrid bass	Varies by location&%	Varies by location&%
Mountain Trout	+	5
White bass	None	10 (except Sav. River)
Walleye and sauger+	None	8

TL=Total Length; LJFL=Lower jaw to middle of fork in tail; FL=Fork Length (tip of snout to middle of fork in tail); CFL=Curved Fork Length (measure of a line tracing contour of body from tip of upper jaw to fork of the tail).

+ See specific lake and river exceptions in SCNDR's Regulations Digest

= In the Santee Cooper system, only two over 32 inches with daily possession limit of 25 fish. In Congaree/Waterree rivers, no possession limit.

% For lake-specific regulations, see the SCNDR's Regulations Digest or visit www.dnr.sc.gov. Keeper season in the Santee Cooper system is Oct. 1-June 15.

& In Lake Russell and its tributaries, the daily creel limit is two fish, only one of which may be more than 34 inches long.

Crappie are among the favorite fish for many anglers in the Carolinas. Let's face it: they're fun to catch; you can catch them year-round; it doesn't take an expensive boat or thousands of dollars of tackle, and last but not least, they taste good. *Carolina Sportsman* sifted through its archives and came up with a handful of great tips for fishermen looking to have some fun and kick-start a fish fry.

They all relate to fishing in the spring, when fish are getting ready to spawn and headed to the bank. Here they are:

BE SURE YOU'RE THERE >

THESE SIX TIPS SHOULD HELP CRAPPIE FISHERMEN CLEAN UP ON SLABS IN CAROLINA LAKES AND STREAMS THIS MONTH.



Dan Kibler

Dan Kibler

CLASSIC TIPS FOR MARCH SLABS

BE SURE YOU'RE THERE

According to Brad Taylor, who guides on South Carolina's Lake Murray, shallow-water crappie action doesn't last for an extended period, but it's sensational when it occurs.

"When the big females get into the shallows, often by the end of March and sometimes earlier up the rivers, that's prime time to catch slab crappie," Taylor said. "My years of experience with crappie is that fish will move to the shoreline first, but still in slightly deeper water, and then migrate into the shallows by around the end of March and early April.

Taylor (803-331-1354) fishes jigs and/or minnows when fish are shallow.

"I vary color patterns on jigs when trolling, but when fishing shallow water with jigs, I'll use a 12-foot rod with a float 2 feet or less depending on the cover being fished," he said.

"I specifically prefer a black/chartreuse jig for shallow-water fishing" he said,

"but for those using a minnow, the key is to hook it in the tail, because they wiggle more and seem to be more attractive to crappie. That's true whether I am fishing minnows shallow or tight-lining deeper water.

"I get in the shallow water and start probing around brush, logs, stumps, docks or any visible cover," he said. "Sometimes, even a small twig sticking from the water in the shallows will be part of a much larger object under the water and can hold a lot of crappie. Don't pass any potential target when working the shallows.

"When you get on some fish, keep working that area until the action slows, then start moving and hunting again. Typically, if you can get on a few places where shallow fish are located, you'll be culling fish.

— Terry Madewell

Guide Brad Taylor said big female crappie won't stay in their spawning area for long; make sure you're there when they are.



Dan Kibler

Dan Kibler

ANGLING FOR SPAWNERS

Ed Duke said every lake has a spawning flat where crappie find all their needs met.

A key to catching plenty of crappie as spring progresses is to understand that slabs don't approach their spawning areas "at an angle," according to veteran angler Ed Duke of Concord, N.C.

Duke, a former tournament promoter who manufactures Southern Crappie Rods, said crappie move horizontally into their shallow spawning areas from nearby flats. They find the depth that provides a comfortable water temperature and wait for the right moment. Then, they move to the bank to drop their eggs.

"The biggest thing is, starting in late February and going through March, is never rule out a crappie being shallow," said Duke. "They won't spawn until the water temperature is in the 60s, but they'll get up on that flat and makes some false spawning runs.

"If a real cold front comes through, they may move back to deep water. But once they get on their spawning flat, they'll stay there until it's time."

Duke said each reservoir has a "special" flat — or several — where crappie find all the perfect conditions for spawning. These areas are close to deep water, in the back of a creek or cove, a place where the current doesn't come into play, and a place with



Dan Kibler

a gravelly bottom.

"You've got to have that combination," he said.

— Dan Kibler

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LET'S GET SMALL

The frequent cold fronts that wash over the Carolinas from late February through March can cause crappie to halt their progression toward the shallows, sink deep into brush or other cover and be hard to catch.

Tom Mundy of Fish Stalker Lures in Laurens, S.C., doesn't sweat tight-lipped crappie. He simply turns to a finesse-type tactic.

"Bridges, boat docks, brush piles — it doesn't matter," Mundy said. "This time of year, it's all about the art of finesse. I use a small bait, light line, an extremely sensitive rod, and I fish straight down to the fish. Put it right on his nose, and he'll hit it."

When weather patterns shut down the early spring crappie bite, downsize your lures and keep fishing.



Terry Madewell

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Mundy stumbled on the pattern when doing some field research for a soft-plastic bait he was considering marketing.

"I wanted a small bait that could be used finesse-style, similar to methods bass anglers used," he said. "I also found that finesse fishing for crappie meant fishing deep into cover that crappie favored: brush piles, logs and other woody debris."

The trick was that the tip of the rod he was using was quivering as he reeled. Mundy uses super ultralight rods that incorporate a tip so fast that it is impossible to hold still — except when a crappie bites. He's watching for the rod tip to stop quivering, the result of a crappie gently inhaling the bait. With his tactics, Mundy is out to redefine the meaning of "finesse."

— Phillip Gentry

“ Watch for south winds, sunshine and the water temperature hitting 50 degrees. It doesn't matter when, February or March, if you want to catch the biggest crappie of the year. ”

"People say, 'Go crappie fishing when the dogwoods bloom,'" he said. "But two or three days after the (water temperature) hits 50 degrees, the big females will be gone — a week at the most.

"Watch for south winds, sunshine and the water temperature hitting 50 degrees. It doesn't matter when, February or March, if you want to catch the biggest crappie of the year."

— Craig Holt

LET THE SUN SHINE

Crappie pro Rod King of Durham, N.C., said crappie, like all wild things, are attuned to the angle of the sun, and that makes them head deep in early winter and shallow in late winter and early spring.

"Sunshine is the most important thing," King said. "Crappies are looking to make a transition as the water warms up, heading toward 50 degrees. But that can be a couple weeks early or late, depending on the weather."

In late February, big female crappie start to move toward spawning flats because the angle of the sun offers a little more light each day and triggers an urge to head for the banks to make deposits that ensure the survival of the species.

"When the sun starts to ascend more and the days get longer, crappie seem to recognize that, and bass as well," King said. "It's also kind of like deer in November. The angle of the sun and shorter days trigger the rut, and once it starts, it doesn't stop, even when the weather changes."

The sparks that set the crappie migration on fire during February and March will be warm fronts, sunshine and a southwest wind, King said.

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Dyeing a liver minnow can help it stand out from other live baits and attract the attention of any nearby crappie.

COLOR MY WORLD

There are times when a live bait that stands out from the crowd is going to get slammed first, and Chris Bullock of Kerr Crappie and Cats Guide Service makes sure his minnows stand out.

He dips them in Pautzke Bait Company's Fire Dye, turning them red, gold, blue or chartreuse.

"Crappie are sight feeders," said Bullock (252-902-4039). "They need to see what they're going to eat before they pull up there and bite it. The farther away they can see it, the better off you are. If you've had a lot of rain and the water is stained, those chartreuse-dyed minnows are going to come out on top — no doubt about it."

Bullock tested out Fire Dye a couple of years ago while tight-lining a spread of eight rods off the bow of his boat in stained water in the Eno River near Durham, N.C. Rods were fitted with identical rigs, with jigs of different colors. Half the live minnows threaded on the jigs where natural, the other half dipped in Fire Dye chartreuse.

What Bullock and his party discovered was that the dyed minnows outperformed the others by nearly 5-to-1. Whether the jig color was black, Cajun cricket, key lime pie or even chartreuse, the chartreuse minnows were favored. After the test results were deemed conclusive, all jigs were outfitted with the chartreuse minnows, and a cooler was filled with crappie.

To duplicate that kind of success, anglers must do what they often do poorly — read the directions. While it is tempting to



Dan Kibler

just fill a bucket with minnows and water and pour in the dye, that often leads to wasted effort.

"If you put too much water in, they either won't dye quickly or dye at all," Bullock said. "It has to be just enough to aerate, about 3 to 4 inches deep, then you pour in the bottle. After about an hour to an hour-and-a-half, you dip them out and put them in clean water. They'll stay dyed and living the rest of the day."

Instructions are to add one bottle of Fire Dye to 12 ounces of water for a long soak, or one bottle to 32 ounces of water for a short soak.

While Bullock favors chartreuse in stained water, red, gold, and blue can be productive in other circumstances — just like different jig colors. Anglers are advised to experiment and find the palate preference of crappie on any given day.

— Dan Kibler

Long-lining is a technique that's great for covering plenty of ground in the early spring when you're hunting for concentrations of prespawn crappie.



LONG-LINING BASICS

• **Don't stop.** Unlike tight-lining, in long-lining, the speed of the boat determines the depth of the baits and/or lures. Stopping over underwater cover too long will cause you to lose your religion when every line hangs up at once.

• **Work from the rod holder.** Multiple hook-ups, snags and crossed lines will often occur at once. Work each rod individually, then put it back in the holder.

• **Avoid straight lines.** Trolling in straight lines will catch super-aggressive fish, but a better approach is to zig-zag. During a turn, inside baits will drop and outside baits will rise, often helping you to zero in on the depth the fish are holding.

• **Stay in your lane.** When reeling in a fish, get it to the surface and bring in into the appropriate "lane" to prevent it from crossing lines to avoid tangles.

• **Look for bait, not fish.** Crappie may suspend just below the surface and not show up on sonar when checking out an area to troll. The presence of bait, preferably in small pods or schools rather than thick layers, will indicate that predator fish are down there stirring things up.

• **Keep track of colors.** Start with eight to 10 different colors and keep track of which rod sports which color by hanging a duplicate jig/skirt on that rod holder. As the day progresses, a color pattern will emerge.

• **Use a net.** The pressure of being "towed" behind the boat will wallow out hook holes in the fish's mouth. Slide a long-handled net under the fish, especially bigger ones, before taking the pressure off at the surface. ■

— Phillip Gentry

SMALL CRAFT ADVISORY >

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SMALL CRAFT ADVISORY

Phillip Gentry

Look for crappie and bream species to begin staging for the spawn by first of March.



TARGETING PANFISH FROM A PLASTIC BOAT

Phillip Gentry

SET UP FOR CRAPPIE, SHELLCRACKERS, BLUEGILL AS SPAWN ARRIVES

For many kayak anglers, early spring ushers in panfish season. As soon as waters begin to warm and daylight begins to stretch later into the evening, panfish, notably crappie and bream species, begin making preparations for the upcoming spawn.

Kayak anglers have a unique opportunity when it comes to tackling panfish in the shallows. No navigable water is off limits, which gives wood and sandy bottom nesters no place to hide.

To specifically target panfish from a kayak, a few rigging tips can make the pursuit much easier. The beauty of kayak fishing is that a plastic boat is very similar to a Mister Potato Head; parts are interchangeable, giving the paddler the option of rigging the same boat for different species.

CRAPPIE

More than other panfish species, the multiple-rod approach has long been a stand-by for powerboat crappie anglers, and it's making its way into the plastic-boat set. A set of track rails, available as

accessories at most finer kayak retail outlets, can assist with temporarily positioning rods by pairing rod holder mounts with track feet that slide in and slide out of the rail when not needed.

Although metal rod holders are an option, most kayak mounted rod holders tend to be of the positional plastic variety from manufacturers such as Scotty, Ram, Yak Attack and Railblaza.

Rod holders can be positioned to troll forward for tight-line fishing or positioned to long-line troll behind the boat.

SHELLCRACKERS

Shellcracker fishing can present an either/or option when it comes to number of rods. Fishing with baited lines fanned around the boat requires a number of rod holders, while also necessitating the use of an anchoring system.

For stationary, fan-casting lines around the boat, it's important to anchor both ends to keep the kayak from swinging over your lines in the wind. A combination stake-out pole, bottom-anchor set or Power Pole will work in water up to 8 feet

deep. Deeper than that, and the options become more dual-bottom anchor systems.

BLUEGILL

Fishing for bluegill, more commonly known as bream in the Carolinas, is typically more of a single-pole operation, although one or two anchoring systems are advisable to keep the boat stationary when concentration of bream is located.

Sonar capabilities are useful for all types of panfishing. Knowing the bottom depth gives you an advantage, as well as being able to read bottom density and structure, as panfish often prefer wood structure and/or sandy, hard-packed bottom for staging and spawning. ■



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.

SLABS: 1 POLE OR MANY

Early in the spring, crappie will be moving along traditional routes on their way to spawning grounds, and spawning will begin to take place by the end of the March and into April in both Carolinas. One of the best ways to catch crappie during the prespawn migration is by trolling, either pushing baits forward or pulling multiple rods behind the boat. For this, your kayak needs rod holders.

Rod holders can be positioned either along each gunwale or across the front. Rigging for tight-lining, aka spider rigging, allows the angler to push baits forward, using 12- to 14-foot, light-action rods to dangle the baits out in front of the boat.

"We have designed rod-holder systems for kayaks that lets you tight-line or long-line troll same as you would from a power boat," said David Baynard, owner of Driftmaster in Manning, S.C.

If using a paddle versus a pedal-driven kayak, be sure to allow room on each side for the paddle to clear without hitting the rods. Typical tight-lining speeds are slow, less than 1 mph, so a deep, easy paddle stroke is sufficient to propel the boat.

The same setup also needs to be adjustable to spread rods to each side to long-line troll behind the boat. Make sure rods extend far enough to the right and left so you aren't paddling into your lines. Another tip is to stagger the lengths of rods so lines are spread out, and angle each rod holder successively, higher to lower so one rod does not bend back into the next rod when a fish is on.

Once crappie move to the backs of creeks to spawn, it's time to ditch the multiple rods and go with one jigging or shooting rod. That dead-end cut that was full of undergrowth last summer is now full of water and crappie. A road that crosses a culvert between the main lake and one of these sloughs will be an excellent place to dump a kayak to fish an area no powerboat can reach.

"There are areas in the drainage creeks are so shallow you can't

BEST BETS

NORTH CAROLINA

WHAT — Crappie

WHERE — B. Everett Jordan Lake

HOW — Trolling 1/16-ounce jigs behind your kayak

LAUNCH — A list of public access sites can be found at www.ncwildlife.org/boating/where-to-boat

INSIDER TIP — Jordan's predominantly white crappie population prefers larger profile baits. To create a more appetizing bait, use larger 2- to 3 inch jig bodies and/or tip your jig with a medium minnow.

SOUTH CAROLINA

WHAT — Bream

WHERE — Lake Moultrie

HOW — Target offshore brush piles in 12 to 15 feet of water using worms and crickets

LAUNCH — Public launch areas on the lake can be found at <http://moultrie.uslakes.info/POI/Boat-Ramps/>

INSIDER TIP — If you don't know the locations of any other brushpiles, a map of public fishing structures can be found on the SCDNR website at <http://www.dnr.sc.gov/fish/fishattract/moultrie.html>

get an outboard in there, but a one-man boat slides right through," said angler Whitey Outlaw of St. Matthews, S.C. "Not only that, but sometimes the bigger, spawning fish will be on nests only a foot deep and I can ease up within a pole length and pick them off." ■

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SMALL CRAFT ADVISORY

continued



LEW'S BREAM STICK

Lew's Bream Sticks were the original bream poles that took the panfish market by storm back in Lew's earliest days. There have been some improvements in materials and construction, but those good ole' fish-catching actions are like they used to be.

Bream Sticks are light but strong, sensitive but tough, and priced to fit the wallets of even the most budget-minded anglers. They feature a telescopic, multi-section blank with a built-in hook keeper that extends easily to full length and collapses to a compact size for easy storage.

Bream Sticks come in 10- and 12-foot lengths.

MSRP is \$12.99 to \$14.99.

Available at lews.com.

POWER-POLE MICRO

When you're getting up close and personal in your small vessel, there's nothing better to have onboard than the Power-Pole Micro. This little anchor system offers big stopping power with a silent and secure hold. The all-electric Micro is ultra-compact and designed to deliver while you're fishing in your small craft.

The Micro features a lightweight, compact design with virtually silent operation, including an adjustable mounting bracket, 2-button key fob remote and an advanced dash switch.

The Micro will hold john boats and small skiffs up to 1,500 pounds, perfect for kayaks and paddleboards. The driver unit is easily-removable, making storage or transfer simple.

It also includes an adjustable mounting bracket. The anchoring system includes a 15-foot power cable for a 12V battery; if no on-board battery is available, add the Micro battery pack & charger and go wherever adventure takes you.

MSRP is \$599.99

Available at www.power-pole.com/micro



Gus Gustafson said Lake Norman crappie tend to be on the large size because of a smaller population of fish due to competition from white perch.

LAKE NORMAN SLABS

begin move to shallows this month

Guide Gus Gustafson of Lake Norman Ventures said March is the best or second-best month for crappie at North Carolina's Lake Norman.

"It's the time when the fish become accessible to fishermen," said Gustafson (www.fishingwithgus.com). "When the water temperature creeps into the lower 50s, the fish begin to move to the bank, where they linger in water 7 feet deep or less as the urge to spawn increases."

The fish favor the sunny side of the shoreline, holding in brush and laydowns.

Gustafson said the move to the shallows my start in early March since the winter has been mild. It continues through March and maybe into early April depending on the weather.

"Not all crappie spawn at the same time; they'll be some fish in shallow cover for a long period of time," he said.

The best way to locate brush that's holding spawning crappie is to spend a day searching the shoreline with a side-scan unit and marking the places with your GPS, so you can return to them later even if the water level changes.

"The days of spending hours putting in brush piles are about over," said Gustafson. "There's plenty of brush already in Norman, and the side-scan units make finding existing brush piles much easier. The trick is to know where to search, because brush and crappie aren't all over the lake."

Gustafson said anglers should search in creeks with older docks and piers: McCrary, Reeds, Mountain Island and Beaverdam.

"Pay attention to old docks that have rod holders, bait buckets, night lights and wire tie-downs," said Gustafson. "These docks likely have brush planted around them. A side-scan unit can pinpoint the location of the brush."

Gustafson avoids recently developed areas of the lake where newly built piers and docks have little or no brush.

He favors light spinning gear for taking shallow-water crappie, filling his reels with 4- to 10-pound test line so he can easily cast 1/16- and 1/32-ounce jigs in white, blue, green or chartreuse, the later his go-to color. Occasionally, he tips the jigs with minnows.

Gustafson said some fishermen slow-troll or drift for March crappie, but they're after suspended, staging fish that have yet to move shallow.

If all else fails, he goes to the numerous brush-laden bridges at Norman, double-anchors or employs the anchor-lock feature of his trolling motor and fishes vertically with jigs and minnows.

"You'll catch more 14-



Gus Gustafson

17-inch crappie than you will little crappie," Gustafson said. "Competition from white perch has thinned out the crappie population, resulting in fewer small crappie. Set the hook lightly, because even big crappie have paper mouths." ■

— Tony Garitta

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SPRO RK CRAWLER SERIES

With spring bass fishing right around the corner, SPRO has added four colors to its line of RK Crawler crankbaits, all of them carrying different shades of red — just as anglers get ready to try and fool bass with crawfish-colored lures.

The RK Crawler 55, the RK Crawler MD 55 and the RK Crawler 50 will add electric red craw, melon craw, burnt orange craw and red river craw to their offerings.

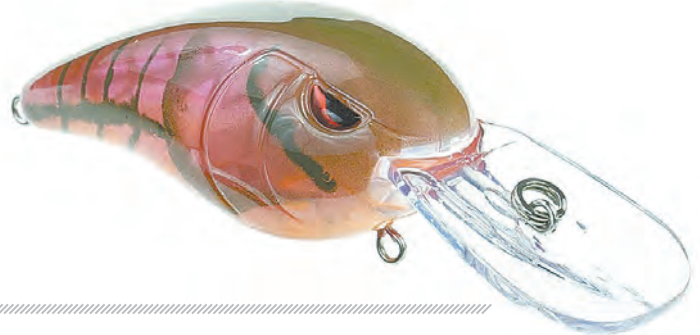
The RK Crawler 55 is the deep-diver, a 3-inch, ½-ounce bait that runs from 9 to 14 feet deep. The RK Crawler MD 55 is the same size but runs 4 to 8 feet deep. The RK Crawler 50 is a slightly smaller version, 2¾ inches and ⅝-ounce bait that runs 4 to 8 feet deep with a tighter wobble.

The coffin-bill style helps bait in the RK Crawler line to deflect off submerged, wooden cover like stumps and limbs,

as well as rocks, without hanging up, attracting the attention of bass that are often keying on crawdads.

MSRP: \$11.11.

For more info, visit: spro.com.



SWAGGER STALKER QD42 BIPOD

Need a solid rest in the field for your rifle, muzzleloader, shotgun or crossbow? Swagger's new Stalker QD42 may be just the ticket.

The QD42 features spring bases in each leg that allows for easy movement, pivoting and tracking of targets. The legs adjust from 14 to 42 inches, with one-hand adjustments possible, making it easy to shoot from plenty of positions in the field. Adjustments are quick and easy.

The QD42 weighs only 15 ounces, so it's not going to cause any hernias when attached to your weapon. It mounts to a Picatinny rail or Quick Detach.

MSRP: \$129.99

For more info, visit: swaggerbipods.com

CZ 1012 SHOTGUN

If you're tired of having to spend too much time after hunts cleaning your shotgun, making sure it's spotless so the gas-operated recoil system works, then the CZ 1012 shotgun is for you.

A moderately priced semi-automatic, the CZ 1012 comes in five models, all in 12-gauge with a 28-inch barrel, with the company's new gas-less, spring bolt operating system, which uses recoil from the shot to rotate and unlock the twin-lug bolt head from the barrel extension to withdraw the spent shell. Maintenance requirements are minimal compared to gas-operated guns.

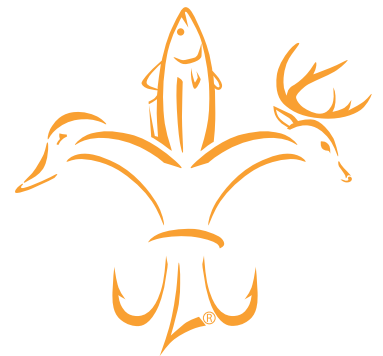
Unlike many semi-automatic guns, the inertia-operated recoil system in the CZ 1012 will shoot anything

from light dove loads to magnum waterfowl loads without any adjustments. The gun handles 2¾ and 3-inch shells.

The CZ 1012 weighs in at 6½ pounds and comes in Mossy Oak camo and four other stock/receiver combos, including Turkish walnut and polymer, each with five interchangeable chokes. It also comes with an adjustable stock to ensure a perfect fit for every shooter.

MSRP: \$659-\$749.

For more info, visit: www.cz-usa.com





Spring speck SURGE

Spring arrives early for Carolina anglers, and after another relatively mild winter, the speckled trout fishing in the coming weeks is expected to produce solid results.

Specks have an opportunity to take a ride back to the dock during any month, but fall and spring rank high on the list. While many anglers concentrate on the fall bite, the spring season can be epic if they choose their locations wisely and incorporate a game-winning strategy.

From 1,000-pound tiger sharks lurking offshore to doormat flounder patrolling the docks along the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, saltwater fish are truly free, with the ability to travel just about anywhere they please. They migrate throughout their range as environmental conditions change with the seasons. Some practically travel the globe each year; others travel in a much smaller circle to take advantage of water conditions and feeding opportunities.

WARMING WATERS GIVE SPECKLED TROUT A REASON TO STIR AS SPRING APPROACHES, AND ANGLERS ALONG THE COAST OF THE CAROLINAS NEED TO BE READY.

■ By Jeff Burleson



Speckled trout migrate up and down the Eastern Seaboard, in and out of inlets and estuaries,
THROUGHOUT THE YEAR.

The inshore waters along the coast of the Carolinas will typically have speckled trout around every month. Water temperature and food availability are driving factors that shape their movements, and spring can offer prime water temperatures and plenty of available forage for a good chance to limit out on specks.

Dan Connelly of O-Fish-Al Expeditions is locally known as the “official fish whisperer” of Murrells Inlet, S.C., and speckled trout are one of his specialties, offering strong, consistent spring action.

“As we creep into spring, we start catching trout regularly again, back in the creeks,” said Connelly (843-241-7022). “We find more and bigger trout chasing mullet around in the creeks.”

Typically, glass minnows, pinfish, croakers, menhaden and finger mullet migrate out of the creeks and estuaries into the ocean as the water temperature drops in the fall. Carolina estuaries will often retain a small population of mullet to feed the local fleet of overwintering redfish and speckled trout. As the water begins to warm in spring, the local mullet population feels the heat and becomes more active, and the speckled trout also wake up and begin putting heat on the mullet.

Even though conditions are shaping up, mullet aren’t widespread, and anglers must go into seek-and-search mode. Connelly tries to find creeks that are loaded with bait; when he does, he’s found his next place to fish.

“In the spring, I like to go out at low tide and check these creeks out with my trolling motor,” he said. “The water

is typically clear, and you can see the concentrations of bait back in these creeks. I don’t always see trout in these creeks, but the bait will tell the story.”

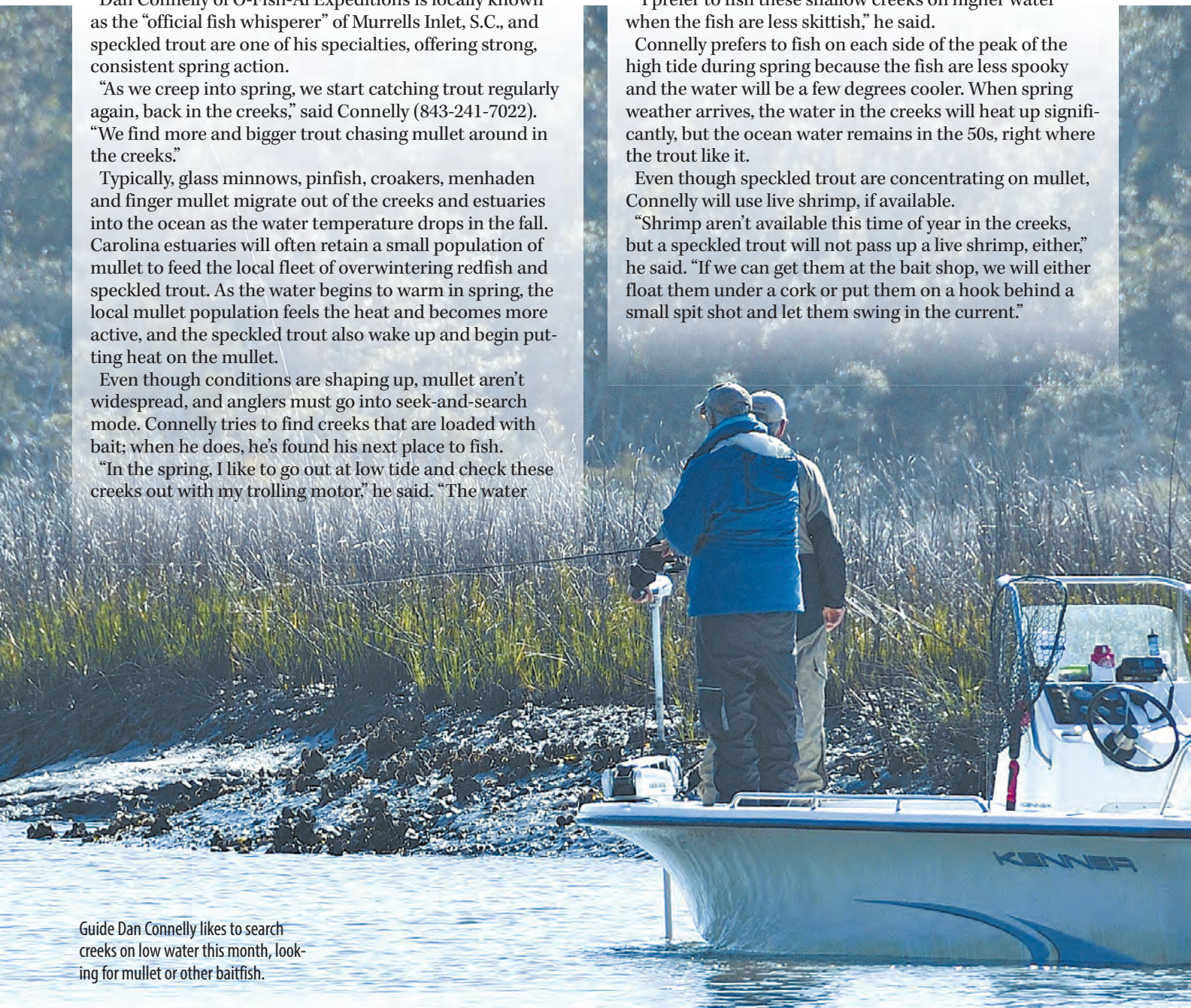
Trout will typically stage in deeper pockets back in these creeks and ambush bait as it passes by. Connelly takes note of these hotspots and will return on higher water.

“I prefer to fish these shallow creeks on higher water when the fish are less skittish,” he said.

Connelly prefers to fish on each side of the peak of the high tide during spring because the fish are less spooky and the water will be a few degrees cooler. When spring weather arrives, the water in the creeks will heat up significantly, but the ocean water remains in the 50s, right where the trout like it.

Even though speckled trout are concentrating on mullet, Connelly will use live shrimp, if available.

“Shrimp aren’t available this time of year in the creeks, but a speckled trout will not pass up a live shrimp, either,” he said. “If we can get them at the bait shop, we will either float them under a cork or put them on a hook behind a small spit shot and let them swing in the current.”



Guide Dan Connelly likes to search creeks on low water this month, looking for mullet or other baitfish.

Try fresh-cut MULLET

Speckled trout typically forage on lively, swimming fish and shrimp, but the lack of significant forage in the spring will entice a big speckled trout to gobble up a chunk of freshly cut mullet.

Dan Connelly of O-Fish-AI Expeditions has live shrimp and soft plastics among his staple spring trout baits, but he will fish a chunk of mullet for good reason.

"I have caught two of my personal best trout on fresh-cut mullet in the spring," Connelly said, "but they must be super fresh. I catch them and cut them up immediately. They can't resist a big chunk of fresh mullet. They will eat it up!"



Speckled trout will hit cut bait fished on the bottom below a weight in early spring before lots of bait is present.

Jeff Burleson

Mullet can easily be caught with a cast net and kept alive in a livewell. Speckled trout are typically eating mullet this time of year, and a chunk of fresh mullet is an easy meal for them. The large, gator trout primarily eat mullet throughout the year, and a big chunk of their favorite food dropped in front of them is tough to resist. A chunk of fresh mullet will also get attention from any redfish and flounder in the area, too.

Cut mullet may not be the primary bait choice for speckled trout the rest of the year, but spring is definitely a good time to toss it into troubled waters to see what is lurking. ■



Jeff Burleson

Dan Connelly



Spring speckled trout will be following bait, but they like to hang back in deeper water in creeks that drain coastal estuaries.

If live shrimp aren't available, Connelly will use an artificial shrimp, Z-Man paddletail or other soft-plastic jerk shad. A slow technique will produce a strike.

"Mullet are typically still moving relatively slow, and a slow-and-go retrieve works well," he said. "I use a very slow crawl retrieve. I cast and let sink to the bottom, do a twitch-twitch and let it fall. The slower the better."

Connelly typically targets interior creeks when the water is higher, but when his trips wind up on the low end of the tide, he will fish in the receiving creeks and around the mouths to these smaller creeks.

"When the tide is lower, I will be fishing the deeper areas outside these shallow creeks. The fish will fall back to these spots on unusually low water," he said.

While there are sufficient schools of trout available in March, they are not as widespread as in the fall. Trout will move from one place to the next chasing bait in and out of creeks. When the trout seem to have vanished, Connelly will slow-troll jigs along the main creeks and feeder creeks on higher water to find pods of fish.

"When it gets warmer, I will slow-troll paddletails in the main creeks like Oaks Creek in Murrells Inlet," he said. "I like to use a ½-ounce jighead to keep the jig down near the bottom and slow-troll against the current at one to two miles per hour. As soon as we get bit, we will stop and start casting."

Speckled trout are not just available in the fall. The spring bite can be fast and furious. Find the bait and the trout will be right on their tails. ■



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.

SPECKLED TRUTH

Chris Bush

Persistence and patience both had a role in the author landing this huge Texas trout on a terrible weather day.



Terry Madewell

NEVER GIVE UP! THAT BIG SPECK WON'T

TROPHY TROUT SOMETIME TAKE A VERY SPECIAL EFFORT ON THE PART OF A PERSISTENT ANGLER

Whether young or old, freshwater or saltwater, if you're a fisherman, chances are you remember Mike Iaconelli's 2003 Bassmaster Classic victory.

Screaming "Never give up!" at the top of his lungs, little did Iaconelli know those words would not only permeate the marsh around Venice, La., but would ripple their way into present day.

I bring this up to introduce this month's topic: common traits among big trout anglers. Michael Salinas, a big-trout specialist from Corpus Christi, Texas, beautifully described the process of targeting trophy fish as "ugly" in a Speckled Truth podcast. Going even further, notable big-trout legends like Jay Watkins, Mike

McBride and Doc Bob Weiss unanimously agree that the three qualities a big-trout angler should have are persistence, patience and a heavy dose of mental toughness. In other words, it's not easy, and the pursuit for a giant will test the nerves of any angler — sometimes even for a lifetime.

PERSISTENCE

Persistence is a noun that means a firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition. A friend who was once asked about one of her most-valued qualities, without hesitation, responded, "A person who keeps showing up." For fisherman, that equates to, "There is no substitute for time on the water."

On that same podcast recording with Salinas, I had every intent of fishing the next day despite a hard northwest wind accompanying a mid-winter front. Cold, misty, windy conditions greeted my 4 a.m. wake-up time, and the palm trees outside his apartment complex tried to talk me into going back to bed. Fortunately, I don't understand their language, and with Salinas' help, I got my gear in the truck and off I went, even if that meant "just showing up."



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*.

PATIENCE

If you Googled “Top 10 Traits of highly successful people,” patience is perpetually atop most lists. I would argue that as anglers, it’s probably one of our most-undervalued qualities, but most important. More often than not, patience in letting a bite develop or changing techniques to target certain parts of the water column, has directly led to success. On this particular day it was the latter.

After getting set up, I realized that wind and water conditions refined my lure selection to slow-rising jerkbaits. With capping waves the norm, I knew a free-floating Fat Boy or Slow Sink would not reach my targeted depth. Also, a jighead and soft-plastic would be a little heavy and not afford the castability I was looking to achieve, so I stayed patient with a jerkbait.

Starting with a Rapala Shadow Rap Shad, I worked hard to no avail. Wanting to change ascent profile and speed, I switched to a Megabass Vision 110 to get a little deeper, and not long after that, I caught my first fish. The bite was picking up, but unfortunately, it was short-lived. To try to keep the bite alive, I switched to an IMA Flit 100, a Jackal Rerange 110, then ultimately a Rapala Shadow Rap.

After three cold hours, I only had four fish for my efforts, but I decided to press on and be patient fishing the lower half of the water column. So, I stuck with a Rapala Shadow Rap.

MENTAL TOUGHNESS

Time after time, we hear elite-level athletes talk about their level of performance in times of adversity. Paraphrasing slightly, you will often hear, “We had to put mistakes behind us, be mentally tough and execute better.” Mental toughness is about blocking out adversity and zoning in on the task.

With rain pelting the hood on my jacket, thoughts of calling it a day started to evolve, especially with the air temperature hovering around 50. Knowing that I’m on the front side of a mid-day major, a day before the full moon, if a giant were to eat, it would be the time. Encouraged by that thought, I blocked out the environmental noise and my own inner voice and instead focused on my cadence and my movement. Being as precise as I could, despite shivering, I made a long cast like so many other failed attempts that day, except this one didn’t come back empty.

Instead, with savage simplicity, my bait rushed to the roof of a willing predator. Anchored by the two remaining trebles on the back of the bait, an enormous trout emerged from the water with polarizing headshakes. Discontent with her decision, she decided to continue her violent, on-the-water display. Unsuccessful in her previous attempts, she decided that making long runs would present a suitable alternative.

On the other end of the line, I hung on for dear life.

Whispered offerings to the Man Upstairs turned to audible coaching of the situation at hand. Understanding that I was alone, I decided to work the fish to shallower water to help with the landing process. After a 10-minute fight, my second double-digit trout lay comfortably in the net, and I gawked at her.

Realizing I did not have my seamstress tape, I took some spare line from my pocket and measured her length and girth. After a few quick pictures and the Boga grip bouncing on 10 pounds, I

Notable big-trout legends like Jay Watkins, Mike McBride and Doc Bob Weiss unanimously agree that the three qualities a big-trout angler should have are persistence, patience and a heavy dose of mental toughness.

figured it would be a good time to watch her swim away. After a tense drive home with a wondering mind, I measured the leader lines and she taped out at 31½ inches long, with close to a 16¾-girth — a true Texas giant.

NEVER GIVE UP

For years, I’ve compared the similarities of trout fishing to the lives we live. Whether that’s being persistent in a job, patient in a relationship or mentally tough through financial struggles, the parallel between man and fish extend way beyond the banks.

As I stood there on a cold, windy flat after watching her swim away, I couldn’t help but be inspired — not only by her existence, but inspired by her willingness to validate my persistence, patience and mental toughness.

So I encourage you, regardless if its your life or angling journey, to never give up. Never, ever give up. Thanks Ike...we owe you one. ■

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As flounder numbers drop, the remaining fish move into the most-desirable habitat in an area. The anglers who recognize those areas will continue to catch plenty of fish.

Brian Cope

IF FLOUNDER ARE IN TROUBLE, WHY DO I CATCH SO MANY?

It's no secret that flounder numbers are down, at least according to the Atlantic States Fisheries Management Council and every state fisheries agency along the Southeast coast.

But plenty of anglers seem to doubt those claims, and one reason is that anglers across the Carolinas claim to have caught more and bigger flounder in recent years than ever before.

It's very possible that those anglers are correct about their recent flounder successes, but that does not discount the data collected from national and state agencies that say flounder numbers have declined.

Matt Perkinson is a biologist and saltwa-

ter angler outreach coordinator for the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. He said skilled anglers can catch their share of flounder, even when the population is in serious trouble. All it takes, he said, is for those anglers to be fishing in the best flounder habitat. When flounder numbers are down, he said it's actually easier to narrow down where flounder are and where to catch them.

FISH, EVERYWHERE

In a location with an abundance of flounder, Perkinson said the fish populate the most-desirable habitats, the marginal habitats and even the least-desirable habitats in an area. While this may seem to be great news for anglers,

it can make it difficult to pinpoint the best spots.

When anglers can catch flounder anywhere, they aren't really gaining knowledge of the best spots. Those fishing in the least-desirable spots when that population is high aren't always catching the most-desirable flounder. They'll catch enough to keep fishing there, but they're probably smaller fish.

"Some habitats are very attractive to



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.

flounder and include features like current eddies, shell beds, a transition between mud and sand bottom — and lots of available baitfish and shrimp,” Parkinson said. “There are other, barer areas that don’t have all of these fish-attracting features. When the population is large, there will be fish in both the most-attractive and less-attractive habitats. That’s because space is at a premium.”

HABITAT HOLDS FISH

But the more flounder numbers shrink in a particular area, the more concentrated those fish become on only the most-desirable spots. Knowledgeable anglers quickly realize where to fish and where not to waste their time.

“As the population decreases, fish tend to disappear first from the less-attractive habitats — either because they were removed and not replaced — or because more room became available on the most-attractive habitats, and they moved to those locations” he said.

It’s like a once-thriving county that suddenly loses some of its top employers. While the area once had plenty of people in town, on the outskirts of town, and out in the surrounding countryside, people begin leaving the area to find work elsewhere — flocking to a more desirable place to live.

In time, the most-desirable parts of the suffering county are still populated. Some jobs are still there, and the once-overpriced homes have fallen in price. This allows those who previously couldn’t afford living there the chance to do just that. The least-desirable areas lose people to the most-desirable areas. Until all the jobs — or whatever is keeping people around — completely die out, then you’ll always be able to find people there.

TRAMMEL NET SURVEYS

So, what anglers — especially skilled anglers — are catching is not necessarily the best way to determine the overall population of a certain species of fish. Trammel net surveys, however, offer a much-clearer picture of what is happening with the fish. Trammel net surveys are conducted by fisheries biologists who set nets in a variety of areas throughout a fishery.

The SCDNR has been doing regular trammel net surveys for decades, setting nets in specific locations numerous

“A skilled angler who is fishing or gigging on the most-attractive habitats may have some success until the point at which the population completely crashes.”

times per month. They count each species of fish, tag many of them, take samples for research, then release the rest. Over time, they have found that, just as Parkinson suggests, many areas that once held populations of flounder are now devoid of them. In other areas — the most-desirable ones — the trammel nets still catch plenty of flounder.

Perkinson said that even when the population is in serious trouble, it’s not evident in all areas until it is truly too late to do anything about it.

“The absolute best habitats tend to hold fish, even when the population is small,” he said. “That means a skilled angler who is fishing or gigging on the most-attractive habitats may have some success until the point at which the population completely crashes.” ■

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GREENER PASTURES

Jeff Burleson

Wildlife can get by and do well with the food sources that Mother Nature and agriculture supplies, but food plots add a level to their nutrition.

DO WE REALLY NEED FOOD PLOTS?

Jeff Burleson

Wildlife need a combination of food, water and cover to fulfill their life needs and to thrive in the natural world. In an ideal setting, Mother Nature provides the essential components to provide adequate food, cover, and water.

In the Carolinas, where food, cover, and water are generally abundant, game species have plenty of options to fulfill their needs. So why should hunters invest hundreds and sometimes thousands of hard-earned dollars on food plots and habitat-management activities? That is a great question that comes with a great answer.

Food plots serve several purposes for landowners that benefit the landowners/hunters and the wildlife themselves. Food plots are not exactly the tipping point for survival in temperate North Carolina and South Carolina, but food plots and habitat-management tactics promote usage on specific properties and may provide that extra nutrient

boost to fulfill some biological needs.

WHAT IS ENOUGH?

Most food-plot growers provide as many acres as it is financially and physically feasible to grow and maintain. On smaller properties — 200 acres or less — the area in cultivated plots may be as many as two to three acres, generally spread out over several sites. Larger property owners/managers will grow as many as 50 acres but spread them out over 20 sites on a 5,000-acre landholding. On most properties, the percentage of food plots is less than 2% of the total land base and typically falls closer to 1%.

On a landscape scale, two to three acres of additional protein and mineral-rich crops aren't going to biggie-size the bucks from 100 inches to Boone & Crockett Club status. And the additional plot acreage will not replace the typical diet of deer and other wildlife species on the farm. Deer will not totally abandon their daily food resources for the new plot of clover that Farmer Fred planted

next to his pond.

The Carolinas are flush with above-average conditions in all 150 counties. A mild climate, deep, fertile soils and prevalent rainfall enable vigorous growth of all strata, from the herbaceous level to the canopy level. Mother Nature provides deer, turkey and other native wildlife adequate food resources to flourish throughout the year.

But food plots and habitat-management activities are important to hunters and land managers with an interest in sustaining healthy wildlife populations on their properties. Every county and every property are not created equal. The variability in habitat is immense. In some parts of the two states, commercial agriculture thrives, and in others, large tracts



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.

of forestland dominate the landscape, leaving little available land for farmers. Property owners and land managers must work with their own landholdings to make them appealing to wildlife and to ensure that wildlife stay at home and don't migrate away to adjoining properties. Wildlife don't necessarily need food plots to survive, but they will surely stay around to take advantage of the groceries in specific areas.

TAKING ADVANTAGE

Even in an agriculture setting where deer have a 50-acre soybean field available, they will still take advantage of a rich, 1-acre clover plot, deep in the woods, away from the dangers associated with the bigger, open field. Food plots aren't intended to replace natural foods or soybeans. They are intended to provide supplemental nutrients and a food source

to attract and keep wildlife on a specific area of land.

Additionally, deer and other wildlife will migrate across property boundaries to take advantage of better habitat conditions, less pressure and tastier groceries. If landowners can keep these resources and preferred conditions available, the better the likelihood that deer and other wildlife species will remain happy and grounded at home. If hunters and land managers don't take care of their deer, some other property owners will take over that duty.

Property managers who have an interest in promoting wildlife with food plots will create as many acres as feasible to provide food across the farm. Food plots will always provide benefits for wildlife with added energy and specific nutrient supplementation during critical times of the year. ■

CONTROL EXPECTATIONS ON NEW PLOTS

Food plots can be exciting to plan, grow and watch when wildlife begin to utilize them. But growing a successful plot requires some critical chemical reactions to take place in order to see the planted seeds reach maturity. Every landowner and hunter anticipates the opportunity to reap the benefits of any food-plot project, yet the first year it may not come out as planned, and expectations should be controlled.

Typically, most new food plots are created out of recently cut forestland or along existing roadways. In these new clearings, the soils are highly disturbed from the land-clearing and grubbing process. The rich and fertile topsoil is mixed with inert underlying soil layers, making a hodgepodge of soil.

Additionally, newly prepared soils are seeded with an abundance of relic, woody debris, resulting from the clearing process. As the woody debris decays, additional acids are introduced into the soil, contributing to an acidic condition. Most forest soils in the South are inherently acidic, and the decaying matter intermixed with the topsoil produces acidic qualities further enhancing the low pH. A low pH is the first major obstacle to overcome for any new food plot.

Heavy doses of lime will need to be added to the soil as soon as it is prepared and ready for production. Limestone can be added in a granular or pelletized form and should be added in multiple applications over the next several years. The first application should be added immediately after clearing to allow the chemical

Jeff Burleson



A good application of lime as soon as a potential food plot is cleared and prepared will get the soil in shape to begin the fertilization process.

processes to begin to offset the acidic conditions. A soil test can be beneficial on these sites, but one can expect an acidic condition, and an initial lime application will nearly always be required.

Newly-created food plots can be enrolled in the annual spring planting regime, but fertilizer will need to be used sparingly until the soil pH is more balanced. In order for fertilizer to function and made available to plants, the soil pH must be in an accepted range.

Fertilizers are chemical compounds, and as soon as they are added to the soil, chemical reactions take place and the potassium, nitrogen, and phosphorus bind with other elements present in the soil. The pH will determine which other elements the fertilizer binds with and which products will be produced that will either be available to plants or insoluble and not available for plant uptake.

Fertilizer shouldn't be totally avoided on first plots, but a major usage of the fertilizer will not be experienced in new plots that are typically highly acid.

Since the fertilizers will not have a major effect on plantings, these new plots should be planted with low-maintenance crops or crops with a high tolerance for acidic conditions. Small Burnett is very tolerant of low pH soils. Buckwheat is also another spring planting that can flourish in acidic soils as well.

The best bet for newly created plots is to address the soil conditions head-on and lay off the spring planting season. Instead, treat the soils now and be a little better prepared for the fall planting season. Collect soil samples now and get them tested, but before the results arrive, go ahead and apply a heavy treatment of lime to get the soil-conversion process started immediately. ■

COOKING ON THE WILD SIDE

Jerry Dilsaver

5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

Winter typically departs the Carolinas in March, but this one has been so unusual that all bets are off. There are usually long stretches of mild weather leading into spring during March, and I sure hope there are again this year.

However, with winter not really coming, just popping in and out for a week or so at a time, I thought a recipe to cook inside might be a good idea. This is one I haven't prepared in a while and probably wouldn't if I hadn't stumbled across a piece of backstrap in



the freezer while looking for something else.

There's never a bad time for serving venison, and this is an easy way to prepare the main course for dinner while doing something else, like getting ready for spring fishing or the rapidly approaching turkey season. It even works as a good surprise on a work day at your hunting lodge. Once you get it going, it's amazingly like a Ronco appliance. Just set it and forget it and return later to the main course of your meal cooked tender, juicy and ready to serve.

This recipe is special. Everyone loves backstrap, and this recipe makes it as tasty as possible with minimal effort. Go search your freezer and find a piece of backstrap to try this. You'll be glad you did. ■

CROCKPOT VENISON BACKSTRAP

TRY THIS RECIPE FOR ONE OF THE BEST PIECES OF VENISON

Spices like cinnamon and nutmeg aren't typically used with venison, but they play big roles in this recipe. **INSET:** Make sure the backstrap can sit completely on the bottom of the crockpot.



CROCKPOT BACKSTRAP

This isn't your typical crockpot recipe. Most of them are stews or soups and those types of things, but this slow-cooks a piece of backstrap in a dry crockpot. That's right, this recipe begins with a dry crockpot and piece of venison wrapped snugly in aluminum foil. I know it's difficult to fathom this could taste the way it does, but it's delicious and tender. The only way you'll know for sure is to try it yourself.

Like many recipes you find here, this is a combination of several things known to be good individually. Most outdoorsmen like backstrap and prepare it a variety of ways. This infuses the flavors of the onions, onion soup and spices into the backstrap while cooking it slowly to be sure it stays tender. Wrapping it in foil keeps the juices and steam contained and saturates the meat with the flavor. This is especially important with a lean piece of meat like a backstrap.

Cinnamon and nutmeg aren't spices often used with meat in this manner, but they combine with the peppers to create a sweet and

subtle flavor. Some of my friends say they taste this a bit more in the onions and try to have a piece or two of onion in every bite.

There is a bit of judgment call when cooking. The heat produced by crockpots and slow cookers varies. The one I have now is hotter than my last one, and I reduce cooking times. The size of the backstrap will also affect cooking time. This was a medium-size backstrap that I cooked for 5 hours and 15 minutes, and it was done all the way through.

Once this has cooked a while, some of the natural juices will find their way out of the foil and steam in the crockpot to keep the heat as even as possible. However, this doesn't make a bunch of juice, and most of it stays in the foil. These drippings make an excellent au jus to serve with the meal. Don't try to sneak a taste. Maybe more than with other recipes that fill the crock pot more than half full, the steam is important, and it is imperative not to remove the lid until you think the backstrap is done. Enjoy! ■

INGREDIENTS:

Half to whole piece of venison backstrap, 1 to 3 pounds. The backstrap must be able to lay flat on the bottom of the crock pot.

1 medium sweet onion

1 pkg dry onion soup mix

1 tsp cinnamon

1 tsp nutmeg

1 tsp white pepper

½ tsp black pepper

Aluminum foil

Optional: 1 Jalapeno pepper.

PREPARATION:

Mix the cinnamon, nutmeg, white pepper and black pepper. Slice the onion and cut slices into quarters or halves to match the width of the backstrap. Tear off a piece of aluminum foil large enough to totally wrap the backstrap. Lay the backstrap on the foil and sprinkle the pepper, nutmeg and cinnamon mixture on both sides. Sprinkle the onion soup mix on both sides of the backstrap. Score the backstrap $\frac{2}{3}$ deep every couple of inches. Insert an onion slice in each score. Break up the remaining onion and lay pieces around and on top of the backstrap. Sprinkle any remaining spices and soup mix on the top of the backstrap, even covering the onion.

Wrap the backstrap tightly in the foil. Use a second piece, if necessary; it must be sealed well. Place the wrapped backstrap in the bottom of the crock pot and put the lid on. Do not add any liquid. Turn the crock pot to low and cook approximately 5 to 6 hours until the backstrap is tender. The time will vary depending on the size of the backstrap and how hot your particular crock pot cooks. A smaller backstrap will cook quicker and a larger one may require a little more time. The backstrap should make some juice while cooking. Most will stay in the foil, but some may run out into the crock pot. Don't worry about it. Serve immediately after opening the foil.



Jerry Dilsaver

Option: If you like the flavor of jalapeno peppers, slice a pepper and add pepper slices in the scores with the onion and spread the remaining pieces around and on the backstrap before sealing it in the foil.

This serves well with a variety of vegetables. I like to begin with a green salad and serve it with steamed or stir-fried vegetables and a baked potato or sweet potato. Whole wheat dinner rolls or a slice of hearty bread accompanies it well. This is a great meal that welcomes a bowl of apple or peach cobbler topped with a scoop of ice cream as the finishing touch. ■



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.

SANTEE STRINGER

Terry Madewell

Guide Steve Pack caught this big, prespawn striper on a sandbar in a river feeding Lake Marion.

MARCH BUSTS OUT

STRIPERS HEAD INTO UPPER END OF LAKE MARION AS THE SPAWN APPROACHES; BASS, CATS ALSO HOT

Terry Madewell

March is known for blustery weather, but it also ushers in big-fish season for several species. The heralded prespawn striper run is under way, and these fish are on a mission to spawn, packing many of the heaviest stripers into the upper end of Lake Marion.

Big blue catfish will also make a move and are caught throughout both lakes and it's the time of year for trophy largemouth bass in pre-spawn and spawn conditions.

Regardless of weather — and whether anglers love to hate it or hate to love it — the bottom line is, March is serious fishing time at Santee Cooper.

Fishing is excellent throughout the lakes, but the upper end of Lake Marion, from the I-95 bridge and into the Wateree and Congaree rivers, provides sensational fishing.

MOVING STRIPERS

Stripers are fast-tracking up the rivers for spawning purposes and are a major draw for anglers. The action is consistent from March through May, and many of

the largest fish are caught in March.

Guide Andy Pack of Pack's Landing said the striper fishing is consistently good by early March.

"The key to catching stripers is two-fold," Pack said. "One is using the best bait, and that's the big saltwater herring flooding into the lakes to spawn. Beginning March 1, we can catch the big herring commercially, so we'll have plenty of prime bait. Stripers migrate upstream to spawn, but they will eat.

"The second key is setting up in the right places," he said. "We'll fish the main Santee River channel, specifically the sandbar points. Stripers literally cut corners, and they seem to skip the deep side of the river on the way up, work the shallow sandbars and move from point to point as they travel. If you're on the right sandbar with fresh bait, you're in business."

Pack (803-452-5514) will cut a big herring into multiple chunks and fish baits on the bottom, staggering his offerings from deep water at the base of the sandbar to the skinny water on the top.

"Keep fresh, bloody bait on at all times

because the scent of the herring will draw them to their favored food," he said.

BONUS CATFISH

Pack said a big bonus is the potential to hook huge catfish with this setup. These same sandbars are also prime catfish targets.

"Big catfish are on the move in March, and it's common to see lots of heavy catfish caught by striper anglers, as well as by those targeting catfish," he said.

BIG BASS SEASON

Largemouth bass action is excellent in the shallows during March, and Pack said his favorite technique is using live shiners around the big stumps and trees in the shallow-water flats.

"Big, live shiners are ideal for huge bass,



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.



Jerry Madewell

Guide Inky Davis likes to work different kinds of cover for bass this month, in shallow water — but close to deep water.

and we've already enjoyed excellent success in 2020, back as early as mid-January," he said. "Typically, the largemouth fishing stays good through the spring. I place a big float 2 to 3 feet above the shiner and drop the rig around trees, stumps and logs. If I see current moving around the targets, I drop the bait on the protected side of the cover first."

Action is also exceptionally good on artificial lures at this time of the year.

Guide Inky Davis said March is his favorite month for trophy bass; he will fish the entire upper end of Lake Marion, from the I-95 bridge upriver.

Davis (803-478-7289) targets a variety of cover types, with weedbeds, cypress trees, stumps and logs all prime targets. With so many potential bass holding spots in this part of the lake, he's learned to narrow his focus to specific sites.

"I'll fish shallow targets close to drops, ditches, or even deeper holes," he said. "Big bass will often move into the really skinny water during the prespawn and spawn, but they usually have a deep water escape nearby. An outside line of cypress trees in 2 or 3 feet of water, adjacent to a drop down to 8 feet deep, is a prime example of a big bass hotspot."

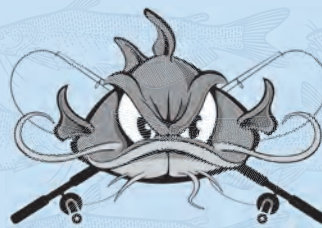
READY FOR CHANGE

On any given day, Davis usually has a half-dozen or more rods rigged and ready with different lures.

"With the abundant cover in this part of the system, I enjoy experimenting with different lures," he said. "I'll have bottom-bumpers with plastic worms and jigs and grubs, swimbaits, spinnerbaits and, as the water warms during March, some frog and top-water lures will become more effective."

Davis said to fish prime targets with multiple lures to work it every conceivable way.

"The patterns often change daily, but with a bit of perseverance we'll figure it out," he said. "We don't catch trophy fish every day, but it's the best big bass bite of the year." ■



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HEAD FOR THE MOUNTAINS

Robert Satterwhite

Kokanee salmon, stocked in Lake Nantahala primarily as forage fish, have developed into a species targeted by anglers, and stockings are resuming to bolster the lake's population.

WILL SMALL SALMON THRIVE IN NC'S MOUNTAIN LAKES?

KOKANEE SALMON STOCKINGS ARE NANTAHALA LAKE'S BIG EXPERIMENT

Mark Swann

Nantahala Lake in the far-western North Carolina counties of Clay and Macon contains the usual assortment of gamefish — bass, walleye, trout and bream — but one exception makes it unique. Nantahala is the only lake in the Southeast with Kokanee salmon, a species more identified with far western and northern states.

Kokanee, a landlocked version of sockeye salmon, were stocked in the lake between 1959 and 1964, not as a gamefish but as a forage fish for predator species, primarily trout. After stockings were discontinued, the Kokanee survived, unexpectedly, and natural reproduction produced a new fishery, attracting a small but dedicated number of anglers.

In response to angler interest in continuing a Kokanee fishery, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission plans to resume stockings. Eggs from Montana, hatched at the Bobby Setzer State Fish Hatchery in Transylvania County, are now fingerling size, and approximately 30,000 Kokanee will be stocked in Nantahala, which covers 1,600 acres.

5-YEAR PROGRAM

Biologist Amanda Bushon, who is coordinating the stocking program for the Commission, said stockings will continue on an experimental basis for five years. The program will then be evaluated to determine if it will continue.

Kokanee aren't big fish; they average 9 to 12 inches and weigh about a pound, but 20-inch Kokanee in the 3-pound range are not uncommon. Nantahala has produced several Kokanee in the 4-pound range, including two state records set back-to-back. The current record is a 4.1-pound Kokanee caught in 2014 by Jeffery Todd Smith of Henderson County.

Bushon said the larger fish are likely a result of a low-density population and less competition for plankton, the Kokanee's primary food source.

Shaped much like a trout, with long, slender bodies, Kokanee have blue backs and silver sides. Spawning is somewhat erratic and can occur anytime between August and February. Both the female and male turn blood red during the spawn. The female builds a redd, lays

her eggs, the male fertilizes the eggs, and shortly after, both the male and female die. When eggs hatch and reach 2½ to 3 inches, the fingerlings migrate to the lake and reach adulthood in about four years, their average lifespan.

QUITE A FIGHT

The Commission's restocking program is especially good news to anglers like Mark Swann of Black Mountain, N.C., who has been fishing the lake for more than a decade.

"They're fun to catch," he said, "and they are fantastic fighters."

Because Kokanee aren't surface feeders, Swann said the most-effective method of fishing for them is slow-trolling. After locating schooling Kokanee with his fish-finder, Swann uses a downrigger to position his rig among the fish. Kokanee



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.

respond to the rigs, not as a food source but as invading predators, and they attack the lure.

Standard baits rarely work because Kokanee don't respond to lures imitating baitfish, because that's not what they eat. Kokanee rigs are designed to attract the fish, not feed them. Standard Kokanee lures consist of a flasher or dodger with a lure attached to an 8- to 10-inch leader. The lure can be a simple spoon or one designed specifically for Kokanee such as the Wedding Band. The rigs emit flashes or vibrations that attract Kokanee.

An exception is lures tipped with commercial maggots or white shoe-peg corn. Corn kernels work best when attached with the open end of the kernel facing the hook.

Swann said he gets good results with corn. "For some reason, they like shoe peg corn," he said.

SCHOOLING SALMON

Kokanee are primarily a schooling fish, usually found mid-lake. "I've caught them at depths of 95 feet in the middle of the lake," Swann said, who has also has caught them close to shorelines, always by the same method.

Kokanee have soft mouths, and it requires finesse to land one. Swann uses ultralight tackle and 4- to 5-pound test line.

Water temperature also is an important factor, Swann said.

Kokanee are more active at water temperatures in the low 50s.

Nantahala Lake is ideal habitat for Kokanee because of its elevation (3,000 feet), ensuring a uniform, year-round temperature

Angler Mark Swann of Black Mountain, N.C., shows off a nice pair of Kokanee salmon caught from Lake Nantahala.



Mark Swann

range in which Kokanee thrive. If the Kokanee experiment is successful at Nantahala, maybe Kokanee could be stocked in other environmentally suitable western North Carolina lakes. ■



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

The "Best Days" column is based on the ever-changing positions of the sun and the moon, rating each day on a scale of 0 to 100. The higher the number, the more solar/lunar influence that day is experiencing (see "Value" column or corresponding black bars). The two Primary periods (Moon Overhead and Moon Underfoot) vary in length from one hour to three-and-one-half hours, depending on a number of important lunar cycles, such as how close the moon is to the earth that day and how high its orbit is. The solar symbols alert you to when a Primary period overlaps a major solar period (eg: Dawn, High-Moon, and Dusk). The secondary periods of Moonrise and Moonset last about one hour each... 30 minutes before and after the listed time. (See key at bottom of each month for more detail.)

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2020 MAR	BEST DAYS			
	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	EXCL VALUE
Sun 1				46
Mon 2				58
Tue 3				50
Wed 4				47
Thu 5				47
Fri 6				57
Sat 7				66
Sun 8				78
Mon 9				81
Tue 10				69
Wed 11				55
Thu 12				41
Fri 13				32
Sat 14				29
Sun 15				31
Mon 16				40
Tue 17				28
Wed 18				23
Thu 19				23
Fri 20				23
Sat 21				34
Sun 22				45
Mon 23				57
Tue 24				65
Wed 25				57
Thu 26				51
Fri 27				44
Sat 28				42
Sun 29				45
Mon 30				48
Tue 31				55

25 50 75
AVERAGE

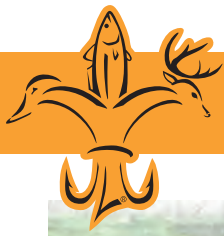
LUNAR PERIODS			
TIMES OCCURRING AT NIGHT ARE SHADED			
MOON RISE	PRIMARY MOON OVERHEAD	MOON SET	PRIMARY MOON UNDERFOOT
10:32 am	3:58 pm - 7:10 pm ☀		3:43 am - 6:43 am
11:10 am	4:42 pm - 8:04 pm ☀	12:42 am	4:23 am - 7:35 am
11:53 am	5:31 pm - 9:01 pm	1:41 am	5:07 am - 8:29 am ☀
12:45 pm	6:25 pm - 9:57 pm	2:41 am	5:56 am - 9:26 am
1:44 pm	7:24 pm - 10:54 pm	3:38 am	6:50 am - 10:22 am
2:49 pm	8:27 pm - 11:49 pm	4:32 am	7:49 am - 11:19 am
4:00 pm	9:32 pm - 1:42 am	5:21 am	8:52 am - 12:14 pm
6:13 pm	11:38 pm - Midnight	7:05 am	10:57 am - 2:07 pm
7:26 pm	Midnight-2:30 am	7:46 am	12:03 pm - 2:55 pm ☀
8:39 pm	12:43 am - 3:15 am	8:23 am	1:08 pm - 3:40 pm
9:51 pm	1:49 am - 3:57 am	8:59 am	2:14 pm - 4:22 pm
11:01 pm	2:53 am - 4:41 am	9:35 am	3:18 pm - 5:06 pm
	3:56 am - 5:24 am	10:12 am	4:21 pm - 5:49 pm
12:11 am	4:56 am - 6:12 am	10:52 am	5:21 pm - 6:37 pm
1:18 am	5:58 am - 7:00 am	11:37 am	6:23 pm - 7:25 pm ☀
2:21 am	6:56 am - 7:52 am ☀	12:25 pm	7:21 pm - 8:17 pm
3:19 am	7:53 am - 8:45 am ☀	1:18 pm	8:18 pm - 9:10 pm
4:11 am	8:44 am - 9:40 am	2:14 pm	9:09 pm - 10:05 pm
4:57 am	9:31 am - 10:33 am	3:11 pm	9:56 pm - 10:58 pm
5:37 am	10:14 am - 11:26 am	4:08 pm	10:39 pm - 11:51 pm
6:11 am	10:55 am - 12:17 pm	5:05 pm	11:20 pm - 12:42 am
6:42 am	11:30 am - 1:08 pm ☀	6:01 pm	11:55 pm - Midnight
7:11 am	12:05 pm - 1:57 pm ☀	6:57 pm	Midnight - 1:33 am
7:38 am	12:37 pm - 2:45 pm ☀	7:51 pm	12:30 am - 2:22 am
8:05 am	1:09 pm - 3:35 pm	8:46 pm	1:02 am - 3:10 am
8:32 am	1:42 pm - 4:24 pm	9:41 pm	1:34 am - 4:00 am
9:01 am	2:18 pm - 5:14 pm	10:38 pm	2:07 am - 4:49 am
9:32 am	2:55 pm - 6:05 pm	11:35 pm	2:43 am - 5:39 am
10:08 am	3:37 pm - 6:59 pm		3:20 am - 6:30 am
10:48 am	4:23 pm - 7:53 pm	12:34 am	4:02 am - 7:24 am
11:35 am	5:15 pm - 8:47 pm ☀	1:32 am	4:48 am - 8:18 am

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Arliss Levi

Arliss Levi, 11, killed his first black bear last fall on his father's birthday. He dropped the 250-pound bruin in its tracks with a single shot from his mother's .308. The bear was killed in Henderson County, N.C.



Tommy Hardison

Tommy Hardison of Williamston, N.C., caught this big bull red last fall.



Keith Wynn

Keith Wynn caught this nice speckled trout last August near Folly Beach, S.C.



Mark Malloy

Mark Malloy had a great start to North Carolina's early duck season last October in Rockingham County.



Bryan Milliken

Bryan Milliken caught this 8.53-pound flounder last year around Carolina Beach, N.C.



Bill Ball

Bill Ball of Yorktown, Va., killed this nice gobbler last spring in Sussex County, Va.

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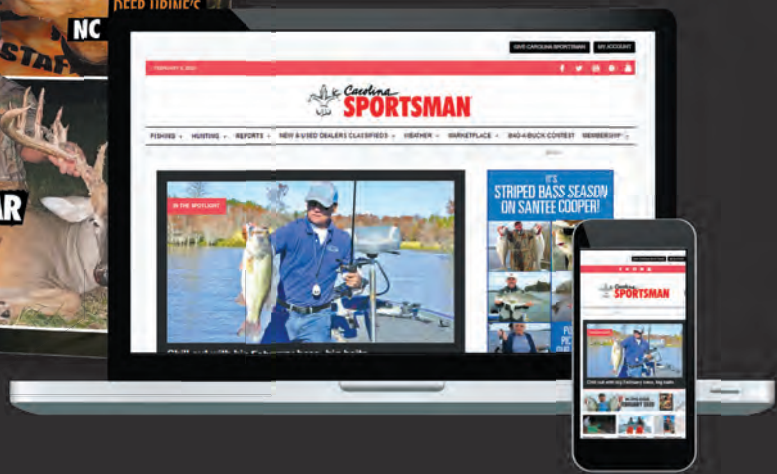
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Wyatt Vaughn

Wyatt Vaughn, 7, and his father killed their limit of wood ducks in Anderson County, S.C.



Lee, Drew Creech

Lee and Drew Creech of Lincolnton, N.C., caught this puppy drum and speckled trout fishing with Yeah Right Charters.



Liam Roberson

Liam Roberson, 5, of Wake Forest, N.C., caught this 1-pound bream on Kerr Lake last Oct. 5.



Tuccoa Kristi Brackett

Tuccoa Kristi Brackett of McDowell County, N.C., killed this 10-point buck during the 2019 blackpowder season.



Tyler Terry

Tyler Terry caught his first shark on Labor Day 2019 weekend, fishing with his dad out of Bogue Inlet near Swansboro, N.C.

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Jason Dunn

Jason Dunn killed this 32-pound bobcat on Oct. 19, 2019, near Snow Camp, N.C.



Alan Grant

Alan Grant tagged this 9-point, 209-pound buck south of Lexington, S.C., on Oct. 29, 2019.



Kevin France



C.J. Anderson

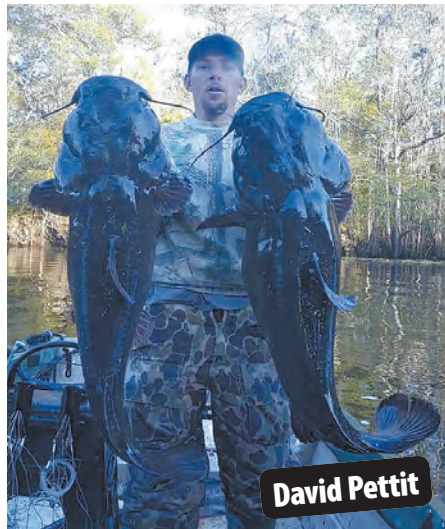
C.J. Addison of Lancaster, S.C., dropped this 7-point, 177-pound buck near his hometown on Nov. 15, 2019.

Kevin France caught this nice puppy drum the day after Thanksgiving last fall in Masonboro Inlet. The fish was 25½ inches long and weighed 5 pounds, 10 ounces.



Lilly Thrift

Lilly Thrift, 9, killed this tom on May 4, 2019, in Pender County, N.C.. The gobble had a 10½-inch beard and 1-inch spurs.



David Pettit

David Pettit landed these two big catfish, weighing 46 and 47½ pounds, in South Carolina's Edisto River.



Chuck Stewart, Carlos Burdick

Chuck Stewart and Carlos Burdick boated these nice crappie in the Flat River near Durham, N.C., on Dec. 5, 2019.



Jeff Cole

Jeff Cole caught this nice flathead catfish out of Lake Tillery on Aug. 23, 2019.



Inman Rikard

Inman Rikard, 12, tagged this 7-point, 160-pound buck on Sept. 14, 2019 on a lease in Saluda, S.C.



Reed Dawson

This is one of two 5-pound bass that 8-year-old Reed Dawson caught on Aug. 17, 2019.



Sportsman FISHING HOTSPOTS

SHEEPSHEAD FLOCK TO ROCK JETTIES

Sheepshead use the jetty rocks that frame Murrells Inlet as a pit stop on the way to nearshore structure to spawn.

Murrells Inlet anglers target tasty fish on low tide, right in the jetty rocks

Winter offers a variety of fishing opportunities along the South Carolina coast, from speckled trout and reds inshore to blue-water predators 65 miles offshore.

The best eating and arguably hardest-pulling one is plentiful along the rock armaments bordering coastal inlets, and the Murrells Inlet jetties are one of the best spots to get a limit of fat sheepshead.

Black-and-white striped sheepshead are one of the well-known varieties patrolling nearshore and inshore waters. They fancy crustaceans and mollusks, and their solid incisors enable them to efficiently pluck barnacles, mussels and oysters off pilings and other hard structures with ease.

Sheepshead spend much of the year feasting in the structure-laden waters in Murrells Inlet's estuary and along the rock jetties. The early spring can produce better results for sheepshead anglers and Dan Connelly of O-Fish-A-I Fishing Charters knows right where to catch the big 'uns.

"We catch them at the jetties year-round,

but the early spring is quite different," said Connelly (843-241-7022). "Sheepshead are migrating to nearshore reefs to spawn, and many stop at the jetties on the way out to feed. We generally catch bigger fish because the big females coming out."

The jetties are the perfect pit-stop for sheepshead because of the abundant food the jetties provide. Connelly will fish on both sides of the jetties, targeting the side where the current is moving the least.

"I prefer a slower-moving current for sheepshead, and the outside of the jetties is normally where you find (it)," he said. "The bottom of the low tide is generally the best."

At low tide, many of the rocks are exposed, leaving a limited surface area for sheepshead to feed, and the current is often blocked by the rocks on the outside, offering ample places to soak a bait.

Connelly typically fishes fiddler crabs just off the bottom for sheepshead on a Carolina rig with a leader less than 12 inches long. He lets the bait sink to the bottom

and turns the reel handle one crank so he has constant contact with the rig. But he catches plenty of sheepshead on his same float rig he uses for speckled trout.

"If we can get live shrimp, we will float them up next to the rocks on low tide, and the sheepshead will crush them," he said.

The most-important part about catching sheepshead at the jetties for Connelly is where he is fishing.

"I get as close to the rocks as I am comfortable with, because the fish are right on the rocks," he said. "I fish vertically when I am using a Carolina rig, right on the edge of the rocks."

The sheepshead bite is the most subtle of any saltwater. Connelly will slowly raise and lower his bait, so if he feels any resistance, he sets the hook.

The spring migration to the nearshore reefs will be in full motion this month and the Murrells Inlet jetties can be the best place to find them. ■

— Jeff Bureson

MARCH TROPHIES:

Big Lake Murray stripers moving shallow

If your goal is to catch a trophy striper, March is probably the best month to go after a big one on South Carolina's Lake Murray, according to guide Brad Taylor. It's also a good month to fill a daily limit, he added.

"In March, the stripers are scattered around the lake, back in the creeks," Taylor said. "Most of these fish will be caught on free-lines and planer boards. Typically, these fish will be found in the back half of the creek."

You will need to read the weather, he said, to know where to concentrate.

"If it's really cold in the morning, you'll want to fish more in the creek channel," he said. "As the water warms up, you will need to fish more up on the bank. You have to just keep fishing to determine what is working best."

Taylor (803-331-1354) moves along at about 1 mph back in the creeks, and he likes to pull the planer boards all the way up on the bank.

"If I start catching fish on the opposite side of the boat from the bank, I just move out into the deeper water," he said. "But those fish will feed all the way up on the bank as the water warms and the baitfish move up."

The shallower water is also the location to target a really big striper, he said.

"The bigger fish will push the bait up very shallow where they can get to them," he said. "You need bigger baits to catch the bigger fish, so I like to fish gizzard shad if I can find them. I also up-size my hooks and fish the bigger baits on planer boards — and then just cover water."

March is also a good month to catch plenty of quality, average-sized stripers, he said.

"The fish will have grouped up in big numbers by then. There will still be a few birds — loons and gulls — hanging around the lake so there is a good opportunity to find fish schooling and feeding under those birds," he said.

"You can cast to them, but my preference is to pull free lines through them. They will be moving fast, so if you do cast to them, remember, this is not a topwater bite. You will need to cast something subsurface like a Fluke or a spoon."

Taylor said this pattern will generally be consistent right on through most of April. ■

— Pat Robertson

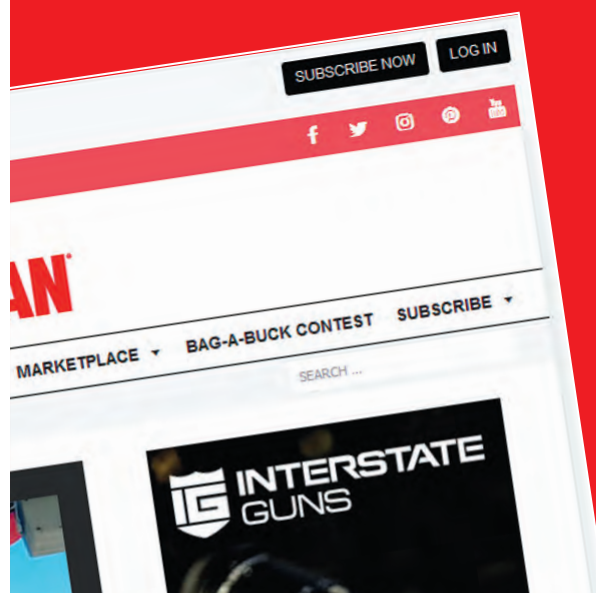


Guide Brad Taylor said March is as good a month as there is to target bigger striped bass on South Carolina's Lake Murray.

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CAPE FEAR RIVER

shad run cranks up in March

While the Cape Fear River is best known for the variety of excellent saltwater fishing from Wilmington N.C., down to its mouth near Southport, the spring shad run brings fishermen upriver to the locks and dams between Riegelwood and Fayetteville.

One of the favorite locations to catch shad, which just happens to be the first place they make a good showing, is in the tailrace of Lock and Dam No. 1, about 6 miles upriver from Riegelwood. Lock and Dam No. 1 is the first of three U.S. Army Corps of Engineers locks and dams that migrating fish encounter between the mouth of the river and Fayetteville. It was completed in 1915 and followed by Lock and Dam No. 2 and the William O. Huske Lock and Dam in the next 20 years.

These locks and dams aided navigation to Fayetteville, but that need has passed, and they continue to impede the spawning migration of several fish species. In November 2012, a rock-arch fish ladder was completed at Lock and Dam No. 1 to aid fish crossing the dam. This project also included renovating the launching ramp at the base of the locks.

While the fish ladder has not been as beneficial as hoped for all species, it has proven fairly successful for shad. The fish ladder allows them to cross the dam more reliably, yet still congregates them at the base of the rapids.

Area fishermen say the shad run usually begins in March and sometimes lasts into May. Spawning shad stage at the base of the fish ladder before crossing the dam, and it makes for fun fishing.

Shad fishermen use a variety of shad darts, small spoons and small curlytail grubs on light and ultralight tackle to fully enjoy the acrobatic fight of the shad. The action can be fast and furious during the peak of the run.

Capt. Jot Owens of Jot It Down Charters (www.captain-jot.com) in Wrightsville Beach has clients that book every year to enjoy the shad run. Shad pull exceptionally well for their size and often jump, earning them the name "Poor man's tarpon."

"I prefer a tandem shad-dart rig," Owens said. "I tie a double-drop rig in 20-pound fluorocarbon. One of the drops is a foot long and has a ¼-ounce shad dart. The other drop is 2 feet long and has a ⅛-ounce or lighter dart. I try different colors to see what is working best that day but generally catch best using pink and purple or chartreuse and bright green."

Owens said to concentrate on the edges between calm and running water. He also pointed out that keeping the line tight in the current is critical for feeling strikes. ■

— Jerry Dilsaver



Jerry Dilsaver

Guide Jot Owens caught this shad at the base of Lock and Dam No. 1 on the Cape Fear River.

A stringer of hickory shad from North Carolina's Neuse River put a smile on this youngster's face.



Craig Holt

Hickories may average 1 to 1½ pounds, while Americans may reach 4 pounds but are not as numerous. Shad also have big runs up the Roanoke and Cape Fear rivers. They are managed with a 10-fish daily creel limit, with only one American shad allowed in the creel — except in the Cape Fear River. ■

— Craig Holt

NEUSE RIVER SHAD

provide plenty of action on spawning run

For such a prolific species, migrating hickory and American, aka white, shad in the upper sections of North Carolina's Neuse River require no small amount of scouting. But once an angler finds a hidey hole this month, they'll produce fast action, according to one guide.

"I look for shad busting or at current breaks at bends of the river," said Ashley King of Keep Castin' Charters in New Bern.

Hickory and American shad are hard-wired to swim from the Atlantic Ocean through inlets and across North Carolina's Albemarle or Pamlico sounds to the upper reaches of the rivers where they were born to spawn each spring. They rest from their travels behind current breaks, including slack water behind downed trees, submerged sand bars and rocks, often marked by swirling water.

King's favorite spots include the Neuse upstream of New Bern where the river narrows to 40- or 50-foot wide, which concentrates fish.

"I keep crappie/shad rods in my boat, along with (striped bass) rods," said King (910-389-4118). "Best spots always seem to be a current break in the bend of the river that's probably 10- to 12-foot deep. I put the boat at the skinny part where I'm able to fish an eddy and ripping water."

His go-to lure is a ¼-ounce, pink or chartreuse jighead with a white grub body.

"I'll also use a tandem rig with a ¼-ounce jig (tied to a 6- to 8-inch dropper line) about a foot above the bottom ½-ounce jig," said King, who has three tactics: slow-trolling, setting multiple rods in holders and let the current twitch soft-plastic jigs tails or casting and retrieving. His rods are 6-foot, light-action TFO sticks mated to Shimano 1000 series or Saros spinning reels spooled with 10-pound braid and 15-pound fluorocarbon leaders.

"If (shad) are down in the water column, I might throw upcurrent and let the jig sink, then retrieve fast enough to keep the line tight and off the bottom," King said.

Tandem rigs often allow for double hook-ups, and shad look and fight like mini-tarpons.

"I'll go as far (upstream) as Pitchkettle Creek," he said. "I can't get my bay boat much farther than that."

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Brian Cope

SANTEE RIVER SHAD can test an angler's mettle this month

We don't have bonefish in South Carolina, but according to Capt. Joel Campbell of Charleston Giggling, we do have the next best thing: shad, which Campbell calls "redneck bonefish."

Shad spend most of their lives in salt water, but in late winter and early spring, they run up freshwater rivers to spawn. Campbell catches plenty of them on the Santee River and in the Rediversion Canal.

"A lot of people discount these fish because they're relatively small, but you hook into a 3-, 4-, even a 5-pound shad, and you're going to be in for a fight you won't forget. And it's not a fight you're guaranteed to win," said Campbell (843-270-5545), who uses a simple Sabiki rig with multiple small, dressed hooks. A pyramid sinker at the bottom of the rig keeps it in the strike zone, but Campbell said anglers shouldn't let it just sit on the

bottom. They should also avoid casting to the middle of the waterway.

"The shad are going to hold tight to the cover along the banks. Whatever kind of trees or bushes line the banks where you're fishing, you want to get your rig close to that," he said. "Once your weight settles on the bottom, you want to slowly reel back in. Make sure your weight is keeping contact with the bottom."

Campbell said these shad are fairly easy to find from the Arrowhead boat ramp in St. Stephens.

"You just head upriver from that ramp," he said. "Once you are in sight of the railroad bridge that crosses over, you can catch shad anywhere along the brush on each side of the river or canal."

Many anglers use ultralight tackle for shad, and Campbell said it works great when fishing with a single lure. But he prefers a 2000 series spinning reel

Guide Joel Campbell said landing good-sized shad like these, even on medium-action tackle, can be a real chore — but an exciting one.

mounted to a medium-action rod when using Sabiki rigs. That's partly to handle the weight of the pyramid sinker, but also because anglers often hook more than one shad at a time.

"When you get two or more shad on one rig, you're not going to want an ultralight rod," he said. "Even catching a single shad here — they will pull drag and put up a serious fight. Shad also have a paper-thin membrane in the corner of their mouths. A hook can tear out as easily as it can a crappie's mouth. If you hook them there, you want to land them as quickly as you can without horsing them. So a medium rod and a reel with a good drag is essential.

"These fish are fun to catch, and one of my favorite species to fish for," he said. ■

— Brian Cope

MONTICELLO BLUES is a great tune on March catfishing outings

You have to be ready for Lake Monticello's blue catfish when they go on the move in March, according to William Attaway, who guides on the South Carolina reservoir.

"In March, I just anchor down on long, shallow points. I like to set the boat up in 10 to 15 feet, maybe 20 feet, of water where I can cast into deeper and shallower water," he said. "When the fish start moving, they will move in droves. I like to have about a dozen rods out so there is plenty of bait for them when they come through."

This setup this time of year usually results in multiple bites, he said.

"When they move they are hunting something to eat, and they are also searching for places to spawn. When they come through you will catch more than one fish," said Attaway (803-924-0857), who runs Slick Willie's Guide Service.

Attaway prefers baits of cut bream, cut

white perch and cut gizzard shad on 40-pound line with a 50-pound leader and either 8/0 or 10/0 Gamakatsu hooks. If he can get small white perch alive, he will also fish them alive.

"I like to start out fishing the shallow water in the early morning and late afternoon," he said. "If you are on a productive long point in the shallow end when the sun comes up, the fish will move deeper, so I move further out and anchor in deeper water in the same area."

Attaway will also fish underwater humps, 40 to 50 feet deep, later in the day. And there is one other type of spot he finds productive for the blues, he said.

"They are feeding on mussels, so if I can find a mussel bed, I like to fish that area," he said. "If you can find some mussels, they are good for bait, too. Just look for a

Glenn Suber shows off the kind of big, blue catfish you can expect to tangle with on Lake Monticello this month.



William Attaway

sandy bank and dig them out of the sand. Those sandy banks are good places to fish for the catfish."

Attaway said one more key to success on Monticello is patience.

"If you have caught a few fish on a spot and they quit biting, it won't hurt to wait there another half hour or so. They might come back through." ■

— Pat Robertson

GRAND STRAND TUNA kicks off saltwater's March Madness

The offshore waters along the South Carolina coast offer angling adventures just about every day — in one place or another — in the big, blue ocean. As March rolls around, the offshore waters fire off with opportunities for a successful haul back to the hill, with blackfin tuna at the top of the heap, especially in the region 65 miles off the Grand Strand.

Out of Crazy Sister Marina in Murrells Inlet, Dan Carey of CareyOn Charters ventures into the deep blue every day the weather is suitable for his 30-foot boat. March is the beginning of a bountiful spring season for Carey.

"We catch tuna and wahoo all-year long, but some months are far better than others," he said. "They bite great in spring and fall. Our spring season begins in March."

Tuna are pelagic fish and will shift from place to place depending on where the best opportunity to feed exists. Wherever baitfish are most concentrated is where the best bite will be, according to Carey (914-760-6452).

"We check for changes in temperature, chlorophyll and anything that creates something different to stack up the bait and concentrate the fish," he said.

The temperature and temperature breaks are the leading sources for finding groups of pelagic fish wanting to play. Carey, prefers water 68 degrees or warmer.

"(That) is my starting point in spring, and anything over 70



Blackfin tuna kick off the bluewater fishing season off South Carolina's Grand Strand when offshore water temperatures approach 68 to 70 degrees.

degrees is usually a great spot to find them," he said.

Carey utilizes a standard trolling offshore setup with multiple lines scattered at different lengths and depths from the boat. He uses a combination of eight rods rigged with cedar plugs and rigged ballyhoo to get the job done.

"We use eight rods efficiently on outriggers — the bird, planers and flatlines — without being tangled and one of the presentations will work to make it happen," he said.

The spring season fires off this month and the blackfin tuna are at the top of the hit list and very plentiful in waters offshore of the Grand Strand. ■

—Jeff Bureson

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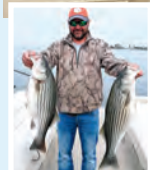
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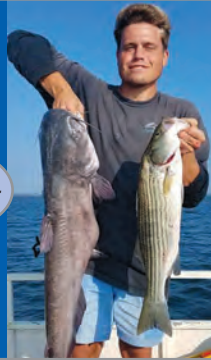
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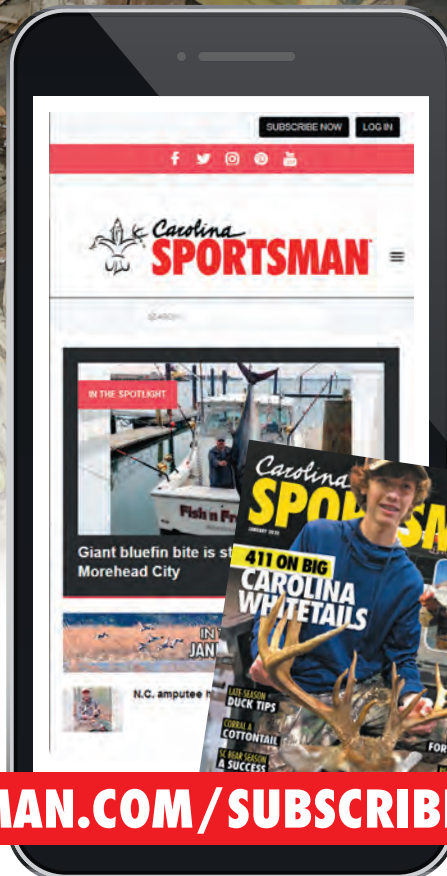
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