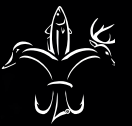


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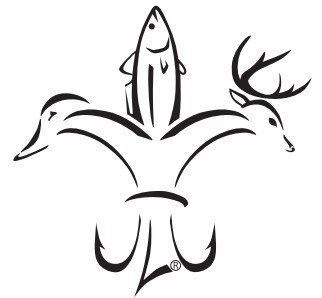
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Claire Tucker of Madison, N.C., killed this 12-point, Rockingham County trophy on Sept. 28. It scored 149 inches.



Carolina SPORTSMAN

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Monday thru Friday, 7 am to Midnight
Saturday & Sunday, 9 am - 6 pm EST

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

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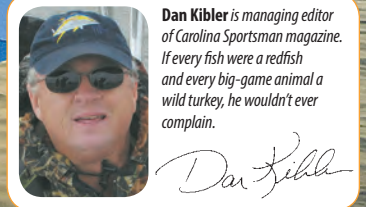


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Dan Kibler is managing editor of Carolina Sportsman magazine. If every fish were a redfish and every big-game animal a wild turkey, he wouldn't ever complain.

SCRATCHING THAT SPECKLED ITCH

HOPING FOR A NICE DECEMBER TO KEEP PRIME FISHING AROUND LONGER

I am hoping against hope that the weather is nice this month. I don't want snow and ice; I'd be thrilled with morning lows in the high 30s and 50-degree afternoons.

The main reason? I've squandered the first six weeks of what I really consider the great fall seasons for fishing and hunting, but half of the reason, I wouldn't trade for anything.

My first grandson arrived on Oct. 10, right after his mother and father spent a few days at the hospital waiting for nature to take its course. That wiped out North Carolina's 4-day early duck season, but my little Bubba entered the world hale and hearty, during his great-grandfather's 90th birthday party, a great blessing.

Then, the other "stuff" started to mess things up. I have long told people who ask why I don't hunt deer during archery season that I have a bum shoulder and don't have \$1,000 for a crossbow, but the real reason is that I love to catch speckled trout way too much, and I like to reserve the little free time I get in October for those yellowmouths.

I got my calendar out and started to plan trips to the coast. One week, I was invited by good buddies Terry Madewell and Mike Cox to go shrimping with them in South Carolina's Bulls Bay. I worked for a couple of days to try and arrange a fishing trip for the day after, but about that time, water started to appear on my basement floor under and around the hot-water heater. The plumber said he'd come on a Wednesday, the day after the amazing shrimping trip, so that took care of the

possible fishing trip to get my speckled trout fillets.

The next week, I had a 3-day window to fish. We had a big rain from the remnants of Hurricane Zeta, and one evening, I noticed a damp spot had developed on the ceiling in my shower. I trip to the attic revealed problems with the 30-year-old roof. The roofer said he'd come by and give me an estimate right when I planned to be working a Spook for topwater trout.

So now, I'll try to recover from a mild case of COVID and spend a week deer hunting, finishing up a couple of days after Thanksgiving. With any luck, I can drag my son back in the woods to help the old man drag out a buck.



Doug and Shane Murray from Knightdale, N.C., had a good day trout fishing out of Rose Bay on Oct. 24.

Bag-A-Buck Contest underway



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

To enter or see deer that have been entered, visit www.carolinasportsman.com/bag-a-buck-gallery/

After that, please, Lord, give me a few pretty December days. Keep the water temperature in the high 50s for a few more days. And keep my vehicle from breaking down. I need to scratch that speckled trout itch. ■

PUBLIC-LAND BUCK WINS BAG-A-BUCK CONTEST

Danny Dixon knows the Croatan National Forest in eastern North Carolina pretty well.

An aircraft mechanic from Newport, N.C., who works at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, Dixon, 43, has hunted the 160,000-acre national forest his entire life. His father hunted there, and his grandfather before him.



Danny Dixon of Newport, N.C., won the October Bag-a-Buck contest with his entry of this Croatan National Forest buck.

"I've killed deer where my grandad killed deer," Dixon said. "I kill big bucks in there; I know they're there."

The morning of Oct. 6, Dixon headed to one of several "killing trees" he has in the thick, pocossin habitat. His stand trees generally overlook places where deer trails through the thick habitat come together in pinch points.

"I don't go in there until the wind and moon are right," he said. "I've got to have an east wind to hunt it."

It didn't take long after he climbed into his stand that he had five does in front of him and another one, much smaller, headed in from his right.

"The next thing, I looked behind her, and I saw something with horns," he said.

Coming on the heels of the smaller doe, the buck finally got to a spot where Dixon could administer a killing shot with his .50-caliber CVA Acura muzzleloader, which was firing a 290-grain Barnes bullet.

The typical 10-point, 137-inch buck, with tines as long as 9¾ inches, dropped on the spot.

The next day, Dixon entered the buck in *Carolina Sportsman's* Bag-A-Buck contest, and on Oct. 31, his entry was drawn as the winner of the monthly contest for October. He will receive a free, one-year subscription to *Carolina Sportsman* and a \$25 gift certificate to the online Sportsman's Outdoor Store.

All subscribers are eligible for the contest, which includes four monthly contests. The grand-prize winner, drawn from all entrants, will receive a two-day, deer/hog combo hunt for two at South Carolina's Cherokee Run Lodge, a \$50 gift certificate to the Outdoor Store and a three-year subscription to *Carolina Sportsman*. ■

NC ADDS ONLINE SURVEY TOOL TO STUDY FERAL HOGS

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has unveiled a new, online tool for people to report any sightings of feral swine or their damage to the agency.

Feral swine, also called wild boar and feral hogs, are an invasive species that cause significant damage to plant communities and wildlife habitat, prey on native wildlife, compete with native species for limited food and clean-water resources and potentially spread diseases that pose substantial risk to livestock, wildlife, humans and pets.

Commission biologists, along with other members of the N.C. Feral Swine Task Force, are seeking information from the public to better understand the distribution and abundance of feral swine across the state, and to estimate type and extent of damages they are causing, including damage to agricultural crops, timber, wildlife habitat, landscaping and others.

Individuals wishing to report swine sightings should visit <https://survey123.arcgis.com/share/bce8e3a80f184710bb2e-4990a3c82af4>.

Sightings reported will help members of the task force determine priority areas where they can focus management efforts. Education and outreach events, technical assistance staff, loaner traps, and other control measures will be focused in areas of greatest need.

"Reports we receive from the public will be extremely important for developing a baseline of information, which we will then use to track how feral swine move across the landscape," said Falynd Owens, the Commission's extension biologist. "Changes in the reports we receive over time will also provide a measure of effectiveness of feral swine control efforts across the state."

Feral swine are highly adaptable animals that can live in urban, suburban and rural areas from the mountains to the sea. In North Carolina, they are typically found in isolated pockets and have been reported in most counties of the state. Biologists hope that citizen reports will help them better assess the extent that feral swine are impacting the state's natural resources.

Opportunistic feeders, feral swine will eat almost anything, include a wide range of vegetative matter. While foraging, they root into and turn up soil, causing damage to landscaping, stream banks, lawns and agricultural fields. On agricultural and developed lands, they cause an estimated \$1.5 billion per year in damages to crops across the U.S. ■

SC QUAIL SURVEY NUMBERS UP SLIGHTLY

The S.C. Department of Natural Resources' 42nd annual Bobwhite Quail Whistling Cock Census didn't produce any surprises this year, with quail numbers on a very slight uptick from 2019.

Quail counts were higher on 27 routes (42%) than in 2019 and lower on 19 routes (30%). Observers surveyed 66 routes in 2010, 63 routes having been used for year-to-year comparisons.

Observers reported hearing 403 whistling

birds for an average of 6.4 birds per route. Statewide, 41 more birds were recorded in 2020 compared to 2019, an increase of 11.3%.

Routes were sampled for one day between July 10 and 15. Each route consists of 12 stops at ½-mile intervals, and observers spend 8 minutes at each stop, beginning at daylight.

Because of natural mortality, breeding populations of quail are never high relative to early fall populations. ■



SPORTSMAN'S BIG BUCK GALLERY

**ON THE
COVER**



Ravin Ginn Polk of Cummings, S.C., dropped this 146-inch, Hampton Co. buck on Sept. 25. It weighed 190 pounds.



Claire Tucker of Madison, N.C., took this 12-point, 149-inch Rockingham Co. buck on Sept. 28.



Cody Tharpe of Holden Beach, N.C., killed this 140-inch, 12-point buck in Brunswick Co. on Oct. 22.



Chris Aycock of Warrenton, N.C., killed this 22-point non-typical buck on Oct. 26 in Warren Co. The buck scored better than 187 inches.



Norwood, N.C.'s Brandon Alley arrowed this 9-point, 140-inch Stanly County buck on Oct. 4.



Jacob Edwards tagged this 10-point, 156-inch Granville Co., N.C., buck on Oct. 2.



Joey Dement of Centerville, N.C., killed this 10-point Franklin County buck on Sept. 30. It scored 152½ inches.



Jonah Adams of Toast, N.C., busted this Surry County trophy on Oct. 5. The 140-inch 8-pointer weighed 215 pounds.



Brian Thomas of Angier, N.C., killed this weird, 14-point non-typical Wake Co. buck in full velvet on Oct. 14. He used a blackpowder gun.



Julian Ridings of Shelby, N.C., killed this 139-inch, 13-point buck Oct. 3 on South Mountains Game Land.



Holden Ayescue of Wendell, N.C., killed this 10-point, 130-inch Wake County buck on Oct. 22.



Hunter Williams of Sophia, N.C., killed this 10-point, 146-inch Randolph Co., buck on Sept. 18.

To read full stories about any of these trophy bucks, visit www.carolinasportsman.com and visit the deer-hunting section.

SPORTSMAN'S BIG BUCK GALLERY



Tommy Daniel of Asheboro, N.C., dropped this 169-inch non-typical buck in Randolph County on Oct. 31, opening day of blackpowder season.



Doug George of Gaffney, S.C., killed this 135-class buck on Nov. 1 in Cherokee Co.



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DECIPHERING DECEMBER'S **DEER DOLDRUMS**

■ By Terry Madewell

THE RUT MAY BE IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR FOR MOST HUNTERS IN THE CAROLINAS, BUT THERE'S STILL PLENTY OF TIME LEFT TO FILL A TAG OR TWO IN THE SEASON'S FINAL MONTH, IF YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT'S DRIVING DEER BEHAVIOR.



Mike Cox

As the deer rut inevitably wanes in December,

so does the willingness of many hunters to sit in a deer stand on a cold day. Rutting activity in the Carolinas is the exception, not the norm. Deer return to their survivalist lifestyle, a stark contrast to the propagation-of-the-species mode hunters enjoyed during the rut.

Knowledgeable hunters will continue to be successful, but they make significant changes in how they hunt.

Trey Phillips from Summerton, S.C., hunts the late season, aka the post-rut, with a well-defined game plan from lessons learned and experience gleaned from his father through a lifetime of hunting.

"Late season is still productive in terms of the opportunity to harvest deer, but a shift in strategy is essential," Phillips said. "During the rut, bucks and does move a lot, and bucks travel well outside their normal range to find receptive does. But by December, they're returning to a home range, and movement diminishes dramatically."

Phillips, and his wife Whitney, own the Clarendon Club, a

2,000-acre facility near Summerton. Phillips serves as manager and a hunting guide on the property.


"By late season, much of the browse is gone, and acorns are usually scarce," he said. "It's crucial to focus on food sources and late-season habitat, not reproductive behavior."

Phillips (803-478-2010) copes with the deer-pattern change, just as he did when early season behavior transitioned into the rut by re-distributing trail cameras around his property to find where deer are congregated.

He said locations deer prefer can vary from year to year, so don't expect deer to simply be where they were the previous December.

"Habitat is always changing, and so will deer patterns," Phillips said. "Changes to habitat — such as timber harvest — can be

Trey Madewell



Late in the season, deer love the cover and security that a cutover provides. Plant a food plot close by, and you have covered most of your bases.

significant, or it may occur with subtle changes such as natural vegetative growth.”

Deer may not go far, he said, but they typically move to habitat providing more secure cover, with access to food and water. Using multiple trail cameras enables him to find and target these high-use deer areas.

Using trail cameras to track changing deer movements is a tactic also employed by Mike Johnson, manager of the Clinton House, 2,000-acre hunting facility near Clinton, S.C.

“Two factors are crucial for late-season deer-hunting success, and that’s tracking where deer go during post-rut and having prime food sources available in those places,” Johnson said. “Our hunters see and harvest some really big bucks during the late season, but we put considerable planning and effort to have the best opportunity, and we move our trail cameras around to identify hotspots. Deer are going to be more cover-oriented and won’t move as much as during the rut. They will rely on food sources we provide during December.”

Johnson (864-316-1371) said he pours the food to the deer, as that’s a major key to success late season. He plants food plots of all sizes, from big fields to small strips along roadsides.

“Any place I can get something green to grow is a potential

“

Two factors are crucial for late-season deer-hunting success, and that’s tracking where deer go during post-rut and having prime food sources available in those places.

”

deer attractor,” he said. “Plus, we also increase the amount of food placed at bait stations, specifically corn.”

Phillips will focus on three kinds of areas for late-season hunting, including food plots, cutovers and overgrown fields.

“Depending on where a hunter is located, the crops planted can vary, but the key is to get some fresh greenery for deer to eat right now,” he said. “I keep mine simple and use wheats and oats. I’ve tried other crops, but the soil where I am grows these crops exceptionally well, and they’re deer magnets.”

Clear-cut areas in early stages of regrowth offer security because of the dense vegetation associated with this habitat, and typically, some forage is still available in the dense growth.



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“ cut openings in the clear-cuts and set up bait stations to attract deer to specific areas, enabling me to place stands with ingress and egress that won't alert deer,” he said. “I stay away from the baited areas except when feeding, and even then, I keep my boots off the ground as much as possible. The slight edge we had during the rut in terms of deer being slightly less wary is gone. Late-season hunters need to utilize every edge.”

Overgrown fields, including power lines, are mowed every three years to keep pine and gum trees out, but Johnson wants ample cover to provide security for deer.

“In these areas, I'll cut lanes for shooting to place bait stations, but often I have the opportunity to enhance the spot with a small food-plot strip too,” he said. “These areas can be exceptionally good late-season targets.”

Mike Johnson agrees that different areas can be deer hotspots and that clear-cuts are year-round deer producers. He uses food to help influence deer movements in the gnarly cover.

“During the late season, we can actually better predict where deer will move by providing ample food sources to offset the lack of natural food options,” he said. “We've found late-season deer movements are much more predictable, with a diversity of food sources, including food plots and bait stations.”

Johnson said hunters need to be more diligent and work harder than they do during the rut.

“It's simply that deer are in a different mode most of the time; they're back to survival mode, but big bucks are still going to check does,” he said.

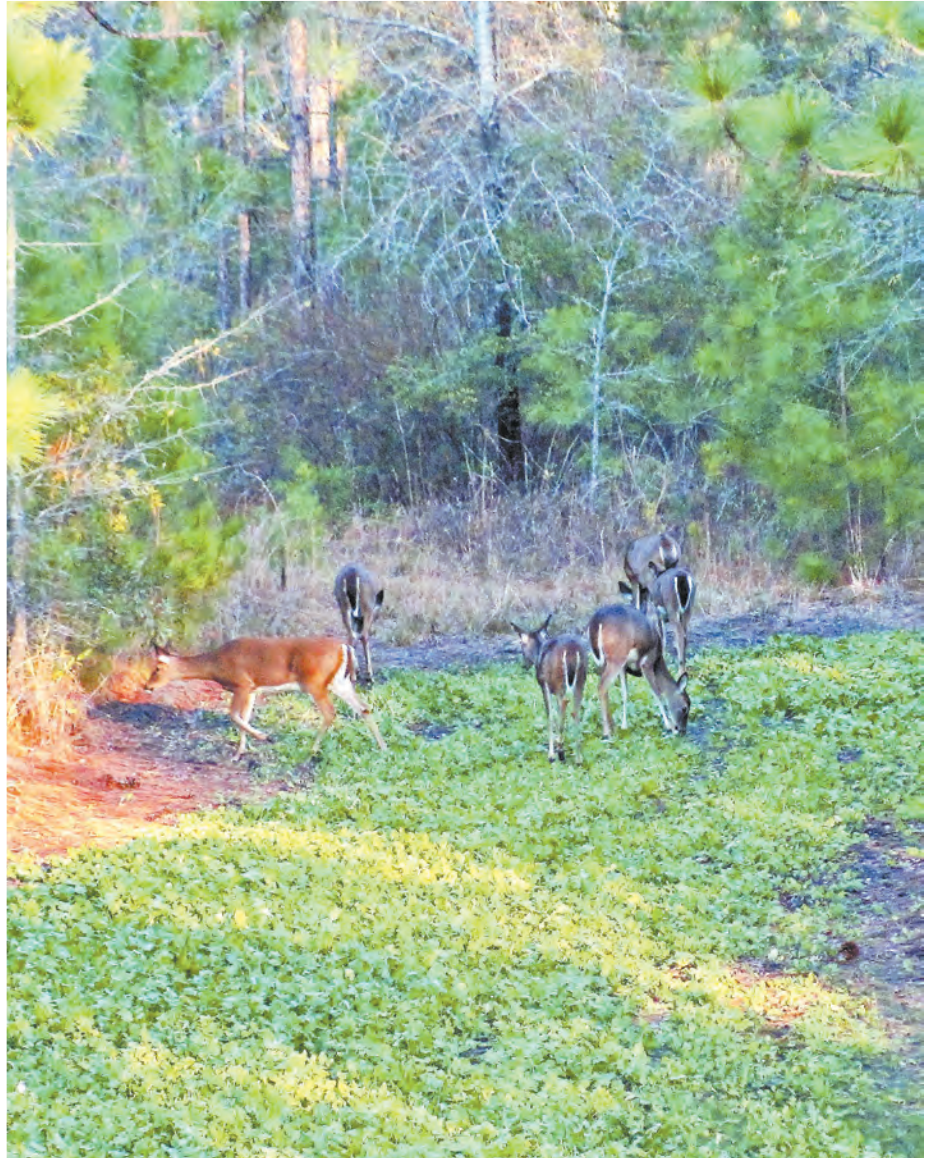
Anywhere multiple does are feeding is potentially a good place to attract a buck, he said. It's not unusual to see multiple deer at a food source in late season, because deer are often congregated in specific areas.

“But lots of deer in a specific area also means much of the property may have less deer movement,” he said. “You've got to find these deer-concentration areas and hunt them.”

Phillips said stand setup is a key late in the season; he takes advantage of prevailing wind patterns and sun angles. He ensures the stand isn't facing a rising or setting sun, because a lot of the late-season activity is during low-light conditions.

Phillips said having a quality scope is a huge advantage, because often, that big blob of a buck will step into his cross-hairs at first or last light of the day.

“Be in the stand well before shooting light or stay until you



Terry Madewell

Food plots, especially if they're hidden back in the woods, can be great places to see late-season whitetails.

can no longer see in the evening if you're targeting a big buck,” he said.

Johnson said patience and diligence are also keys to beating the late-season deer doldrums.

“A lot of our successful late-season hunters spend long hours in the stand,” he said. “One good example is, a hunter spent the entire day in a stand last December and took a trophy buck for his efforts. Deer don't move as much as during the rut, but they will move enough, and if you're in the right spot when he moves, you can take a big buck.” ■

LATE SEASON DEER BEHAVIOR ➤



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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Terry Madewell

WHY DEER BEHAVIOR CHANGES LATE IN SEASON

Charles Ruth, the biologist who supervises the big-game program for the S.C. Department of Natural Resources, said late-season deer hunting can be quite difficult.

"Hormonal changes occur as they did prior to the rut, but now (they) relate to a decrease in deer movement as the rut ends, and with few does in estrus," he said. "Most does are pregnant, thus not an option to breed. Simply put, the reason for all the high activity in the previous few weeks has ended, so deer behavior changes."

Hunting around bait stations in prime habitat is a great tactic for taking late-season whitetails.

Ruth said a couple of events can create isolated periods of good hunting.

"One is, an unbred doe may come into estrus late, and if you happen to be in the woods in that specific area when that occurs, deer movement can increase significantly for a very brief period in that area," he said. "These are more random, isolated situations, but it does happen."

He said a couple of unusual weather events can also trigger more deer movement than normal.

"One is getting a bitter cold front that dramatically drops the temperature. The ensuing clear skies and bitter cold will cause deer to get on their feet and move," he said. "Another would be a widespread event of miserable weather. A good example would be a prolonged period of cold weather, mid-40s perhaps, with drizzling rain. This creates the need for deer to feed more frequently."

Natural deer movements decrease during late season, but taking advantage of unique situations and weather events can put a hunter in a position to be successful. ■

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AS DECEMBER ARRIVES AND
THEIR HABITS CHANGE.**

LEARN HOW TO READ DECEMBER DEER MAP

■ By Jeff Burleson



Another deer season comes to a close at the end of this month.

For many hunters, December lacks luster, and many will switch over to a duck blind. But for diehard deer hunters, the days leading up to Jan. 1 can offer some of the best times to take that **monster buck that's been lurking in the shadows.**

Hunters who keep a tight grip on their surveillance system can map out and almost determine where these big bucks will make their final debut.

Over the past 30 years, deer hunting has taken on a new light, and with 21st-century technology, hunters have a true edge over their prey. Hunters can gather crucial data remotely and just about pinpoint where their final trophy resides in the last few weeks of the season.

Deer shift their daily travels based on a wide range of factors, including changes in food sources, breeding behavior and hunting pressure. Since hunting season coincides with the breeding season and a massive change in food availability, deer movement can be difficult to predict. And that longed-for, hit-list buck is regularly outsmarting his wannabe captors. Yet all that changes in December, and hunters truly can get a leg up on their target prey.

Game cameras keep Rick Grubbs of Waccamaw Hunting Services in Hemingway, S.C., and his son, Will Grubbs, in the know.

"It may be simple, but it's what we do," said Grubbs (877-664-2600). "We run 31 cameras on our 3,500 acres from preseason to the end of the season and sometimes afterwards. Bucks are very mobile, and their range runs from 300 yards in the late summer to 3 miles or more during the rut. We run the cameras hot to get the most-recent information to map out our bucks."

The Grubbs are third- and fourth-generation hunting guides who have studied the bucks on their land for more than 20 years. For much of the past decade, their game cameras have provided crucial information about their herd and seasonal movements.

Even though the Grubbs' typical buck harvest runs heavy from September through Thanksgiving, the bucks killed in December are some of his best, with good reason. Some of the biggest and mature bucks are often coming out of hiding to food sources to both feed and find one of those last

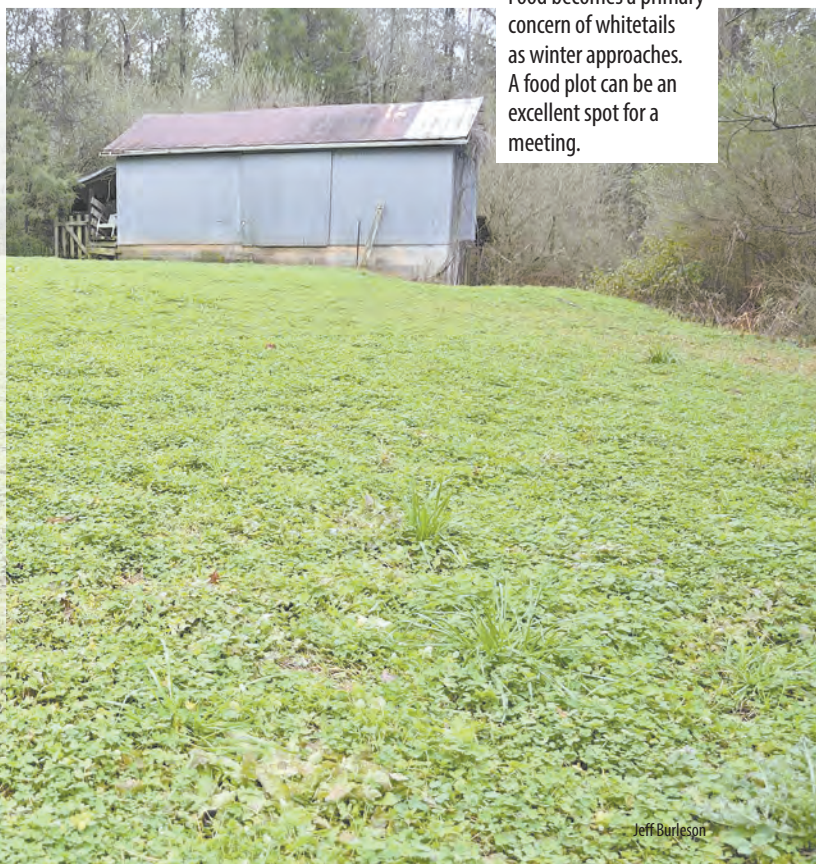
available mates.

"In December, major food sources are the primary places we find the most does, and the areas with the most does will have all of the bucks close by," Rick Grubbs said.

It is not just the biggest bucks remaining, either. All bucks will continue to have hormones flowing, and they will hone in on these late-season food sources to replenish energy loss and to find an end-of-season mate.

Late-season mating opportunities are often with maturing fawns that were born early. When female fawns reach 75 to 80 pounds, typically by December, they will become sexually available, and every buck out there understands and will be on the lookout to rob the cradle.

Food becomes a primary concern of whitetails as winter approaches. A food plot can be an excellent spot for a meeting.



Jeff Burleson



Well-positioned trail cameras give hunters the opportunity to see how deer movements change when the rut wanes.

Jeff Burleson

“Big bucks have been around the block for several years, and they understand the December mating opportunities can be a real opportunity. When the 75- to 80-pound does come into heat in December, the bucks can’t stand it and have to get in on the action,” he said.

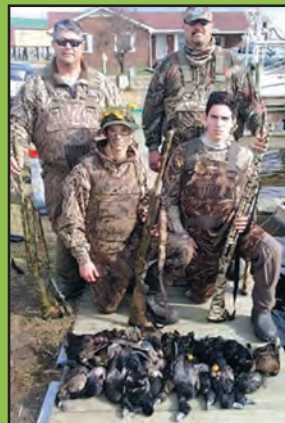


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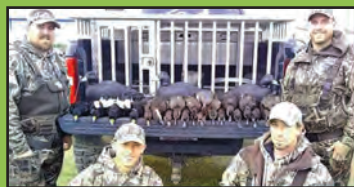
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A big buck will survey his area daily to feed and see if any does have come into estrus late in the season.

Major food sources are key locations for game cameras in December and ideal places to hunt when it gets cold.

“Food sources change throughout the year — or the major ones, anyway. The best late-season food sources are live oaks, wheat fields and food plots with fresh, green patches,” he said. “Essentially, any green fields will attract deer in the late season, whether it be a farmer’s new winter wheat field or food plots full of oats or other tender and nutritious foods.”

Grubbs’ series of 31 game cameras are placed so he can virtually map out the locations of his remaining bucks without being intrusive, so deer don’t change their patterns because of the cameras.

Game cameras can be placed on food plots, agriculture fields, corn piles, high-use trails and along scrape or rub lines. Grubbs prefers to keep his cameras in certain areas and away from others to remain covert.

“We keep most of our cameras around food sources that we maintain on a weekly basis,” he said. “Just like my late granddaddy said, ‘Deer know the corn didn’t fall out of a tree, but they will still eat it.’ Deer are accustomed to human scent around food plots and corn piles. And they can smell you. We replace our camera cards each time we feed,” he said. “If you start putting cameras up on a scrape or rub line, they will smell you in a place they aren’t expecting any human scent, and they don’t like it.”



Jeff Burleson

Game cameras are intended to provide crucial information covertly, and when the deer change their movements as a result, the patterning and mapping process can become nearly impossible.

“I will preach until the day I die; mature bucks will check corn piles as much as, if not more than, their scrapes,” Grubbs said. “Bucks check corn piles religiously. You may not see them on the corn piles, but they sure will check the trails coming and going. If a doe comes to a corn pile for 5 or 10 minutes a day, and if she is in heat, he will smell it,” he said. ■



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GREENER PASTURES

Jeff Burleson

After the rut, deer will concentrate on feeding to restore their strength, and big, green fields or food plots can be dynamite places to find them.



BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

DON'T LOSE CONCENTRATION; DECEMBER BUCKS ARE THERE FOR THE TAKING

Jeff Burleson

Deer hunters in the Carolinas have got it good — at least they have it good when it comes to the length of the hunting season.

Unlike hunters in many other states that have short seasons, hunters in the Carolinas rarely take advantage of every week when it's open. By December, they are quite often discouraged and come up with a list of excuses why the big one got away and will not come out during the daylight hours. But it's not over until Jan. 1.

This is a fantastic time to set up a meeting with the big boy that has been eluding hunters. Since the season is so long, deer go through a lot of changes, from a change in seasons to food availability, hunting pressure and, of course, the undulations of hormonal activity during the mating season. Each change affects deer and their movements. Mature bucks have been around the block for several years and know how to adapt to outside forces.

HOMEBODY BUCKS

The one aspect many hunters fail to recognize is that mature bucks are homebodies and will not stray too far away from their home territory. Even

during the peak of the rut, mature bucks remain close to home, unlike younger, immature bucks that may venture far beyond their normal stomping grounds in search of a potential mate. Mature bucks understand their home territory well. They know where to be this time of year and what is important.

Priorities change throughout the year for deer, especially those big, educated, mature bucks that have survived many seasons. Priorities in December are food, safety and breeding if the opportunity presents itself. Breeding can be a bonus for December bucks since many does have already been bred.

Deer expend countless calories during the rut, and bucks begin to refuel in December when energy reserves are depleted; that makes food a high priority in the late season. With the exception of woody browse and limited red oak acorns scattered around hardwood flats and ridges, most natural food sources are depleted. Green fields, corn piles, sweet potato piles and late-season food plots can be hot spots.

HUNT SMART

While these food sources can be high-priority areas, hunters must be smart about the way they hunt them. Extended

hunting pressure can make these places nocturnal feeding zones.

Food plots and agriculture fields planted in winter wheat are ideal places to find mature bucks this month, but bait piles are also excellent places to draw in deer during the daylight. Deer surely expect to encounter human scent around these food sources, and deer have no problem coming to these food sources during daytime hours when they feel secure. But hunters must use extreme care when you watch these areas in the morning or afternoon. Stands should never be hunted during non-preferred winds.

For best results, hunters should rotate spots and only hunt food sources occasionally to reduce possibly spooking deer.

AVOID HOME RANGE

Don't scout this time of year. Even deer accustomed to human scent around man-altered or man-made food sources aren't accustomed to scent in their home



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.

Monitor the weather, brassica plots

territories. Anything that possibly spooks deer should be avoided, especially if there is a mature buck lurking.

Lastly, these food sources will not only offer food to big bucks, but any high-quality food source will also concentrate does. Typically, cooler weather has arrived, and deer instinctively gravitate to food sources to fatten up for the rest of the winter.

Even though most does are bred by December, there are some fawns of the year that come into estrus in December after they reach 75 to 80 pounds. These are a bonus for mature bucks, which will surely not let any fresh, young fawns-in-heat frolic around in the woods without experiencing their first breeding experience.

The availability of does on food sources is a great benefit for hunters, because mature bucks have been around the block before and know the possibility exists for a breeding opportunity. And when does show up on a corn pile at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, mature bucks in the area may make a visit to check.

Food sources are always good places to hunt, but there is no better time to sit over a rich food source than December. That one mature buck that has eluded hunters for several seasons may just make a final mistake at a food plot or corn pile in the last few weeks of the season. December is unique and can play into a hunter's playbook if there is enough gas left in the tank. ■

Many new food-plotters often complain about deer not coming in and destroying their crops of brassicas, even when the fields are full and rich with large, tender leaves everywhere. But most brassicas aren't very appealing to deer until they get exposed to freezing temperatures a few times. And it's not until later that deer start digging up the root veggie where the real treat is hiding.

Brassicas are members of the mustard family, cruciferous vegetables with large, leafy greens on the surface and carbohydrate-rich tubers down below. Kale, rape, turnips and radishes typically make up the brassica varieties for food plots. Most are planted in the fall and don't fully mature until December. And while they grow, most deer and other wildlife generally leave them alone. It's not until cold temperatures zap these plants and make the leafy greens palatable that they're attractive



A food plot that comes into its own after the first frost, like turnips, can be a deer magnet in December.

to deer.

Hunters should closely watch food plots covered in knee-high brassicas, because as soon as Mother Nature does her thing, deer will show up and pounce on these plots, making them an excellent late-season hotspot.

Don't forget about the large tubers down below, either. They're usually the last things deer eat in these plots, and sometimes, they need a little instruction to get with the program. Dig up a few radishes and turnips and expose them on the ground. Once deer realize where they came from, the entire field will turn into a feeding spot, making it a perfect place to set up and take down that last haul of the season. ■



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The FL-50 is an "above the water" style light. The FL-50 LED floodlight is designed with a more focused beam than the DM260. This model is recommended for docks high off the water or where water conditions is stained or not very clear. The FL-50 features a focused light beam to provide greater depth of penetration. The FL-50 is 120v and comes with a 20 foot cord. The size of this model is about 8 inch x 8 inch in size. The FL-50 comes in green color to maximize fish attraction. With only 1/2 amp draw and 50w you can easily run several lights on a single circuit.

SF100G



The SeaFloor Series of underwater lights are our "anchored to the bottom" style lights. This means the light fixture floats so a weigh is required to hold the light in the desired location and depth. The SF100G comes with a 50 foot cord, a 120v to 24v power supply to provide safe current to the light and an array of high output, green LEDs for maximum output and energy efficiency.



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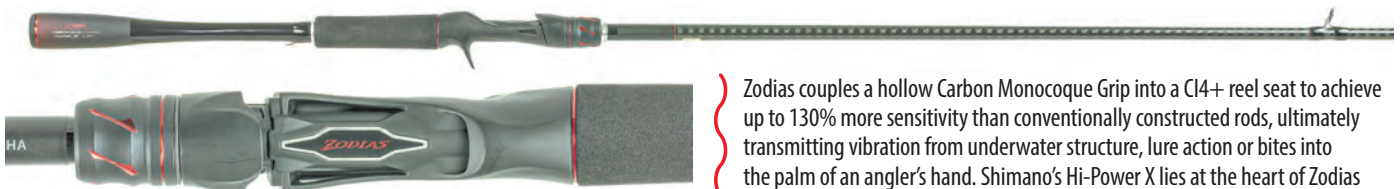
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Constructed on a high-quality graphite rod blank with stainless-steel frame guides and Aluminum Oxide inserts, the new Symetre Combo is a great option for anglers looking to target a variety of freshwater and inshore saltwater species with PowerPro braided fishing line or monofilament. The reel included in the Symetre Combo incorporates a lightweight graphite G-Free Body for enhanced balance and the Propulsion Line Management System for trouble-free and enhanced casting performance. The rods feature high-quality graphite blanks with durable Aluminum Oxide guides and comfortable split-grip EVA handles. Shimano offers 14 different rod/reels combination in the Symetre spinning combo line-up for everything from panfish, bass and walleye, to larger freshwater species action and also for inshore saltwater use.

Symetre spinning combos



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CATCH WINTER CRAPPIE WITH 3 COOL TACTICS

Fishing for crappie during the winter requires a slightly different mindset than in the spring, summer or even fall. Although common elements are found between all four seasons, crappie can be the harder to catch during the winter than at any other time.

Unlike many fish, crappie have a slightly higher metabolism than other species, which keeps them active even during colder months, meaning they will feed at some point nearly every day. And crappie being a school-oriented fish is never more true than during winter, when crappie will school tightly in large numbers and often refuse to move more than a couple feet when they do feed.

In order to take advantage — or sometimes compensate — for the fish's particular winter habits, a handful of fishing tactics stand out as better winter producers than others.

Below is an explanation of three of the coolest winter crappie-fishing tactics you need to try.

BOTTOM-BOUNCING >

SLABS WILL FEED THROUGH THE WINTER. A FISHERMAN'S CHALLENGE IS FINDING THEM AND FEEDING THEM BAITS AND/OR LURES. HERE'S HOW SOME OF THE CAROLINAS' TOP ANGLERS SOLVE THAT PROBLEM.

■ By Phillip Gentry

BOTTOM-BOUNCING

Veteran angler Rod Wall from Ninety Six, S.C., prefers the term “bottom-bouncing” to finesse fishing or drop-shotting, but it’s the same principle. Use a weight at the terminal end of the line to maintain contact with the bottom, and tie a hook in-line to hold the bait off the bottom and right in the fish’s face.

“Typically, the rig is simple: lead to the very bottom end of the line with a light wire hook up from there,” Wall said. “Sometimes, I’ll fish a double rig tied on a 1-inch loop off the main line. Other times, I’ll tie it tight to the main line where the hook stands straight out about 2 feet above the weight — just like bass guys would fish a drop-shot, a very similar process.”


Bass anglers may lean toward an artificial bait like a small finesse worm or grub. Crappie, being more subtle feeders than bass, are attracted to and will bite a plastic bait with the same affinity, but while a bass will chew on a bait longer, crappie will spit an artificial bait with such speed that getting a hookset proves difficult. That’s the reason Wall prefers live bait: there’s no reason for the crappie to spit out an easy meal.

“Crappie go straight to the bottom and hold tight to the ledges and wood structure,” he said. “I still

like to focus in and around the mouths of creeks and on the main-lake channel. I’ll just use my side-imaging unit, and I’ll find a few schools of fish or start seeing what dominant depth they’re holding at that particular day.

Wall said he likes the bottom-bouncing rig in the winter because crappie frequently are going to hold tight to the bottom or ledges where there is structure and the ledges come together.

“I like the bottom-bumper rig because there is no lead between your hook and the sensitivity through your finger or the tip of your rod,” he said. “When you have it stretched tight with the lead on the bottom, and that crappie sucks the minnow in, you feel it. You just set the hook, and he’ll be there.”



Veteran crappie angler Stokes McClellan said winter is time to put out those long-lining rods and troll.

LONG-LINE TROLLING

While long-line trolling is a popular tactic in spring when crappie are migrating to the shallows to spawn, Stokes McClellan, a pro crappie angler from Huntersville, N.C., said his biggest factor in knowing where to long-line troll during the colder months is finding migrating baitfish.

“I don’t like to see big, even waves of baitfish,” he said. “I want to see them balled up in lots of smaller groups. That means something is messing with them.”



Phillip Gentry

McClellan said patterns will vary from lake to lake, but for the most part, in the clear-water lakes he fishes, he expects to see baitfish near the surface in water that runs anywhere between 5 and 25 feet deep. Baitfish typically hold 4 to 5 feet deep, and the crappie will hold a few feet below that.

“Generally speaking, I’m targeting fall crappie 8 feet deep, but I’m not going to run all my baits at that depth, I’m going to stagger those baits until I can locate the preferred depth for that day,” he said.

There are several constants in McClellan’s long-lining technique. He always trolls with 4-pound, clear monofilament. He trolls at boat speeds between .9 and 1.0 mph — never less than .7 mph and rarely faster than 1.3 mph. And he never tips his jigs with minnows. Minnows add weight and throw off the dynamic and that affects the depths he’s fishing in an unpredictable way.

“I use a lot of larger, curlytail plastics when I long-line,” he said. “Plastics won’t ripple at less than .7 mph, so that’s as slow as I ever go. If I need to add scent in colder weather, I use an attractant called Pro Cure. It works just as well at getting bites, and I’ve never had a tube of it die and leave me without bait.”

Phillip Gentry

JIG DEEP BRUSH, STRUCTURE ➤

Stokes McClellan never uses minnows for winter fishing. He prefers the action of a curlytail jig to elicit bites and will use a scent application if smell is needed.

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JIG DEEP BRUSH, STRUCTURE

Before he wets a line when seeking winter crappie, Tom Mundy, owner of Fish Stalker Lures and crappie guru from Laurens, S.C., wants to know for certain where crappie are holding and why they are there. Once he's found them, he's going to look into travel corridors and food supplies. With all these things in place, he'll catch fish.

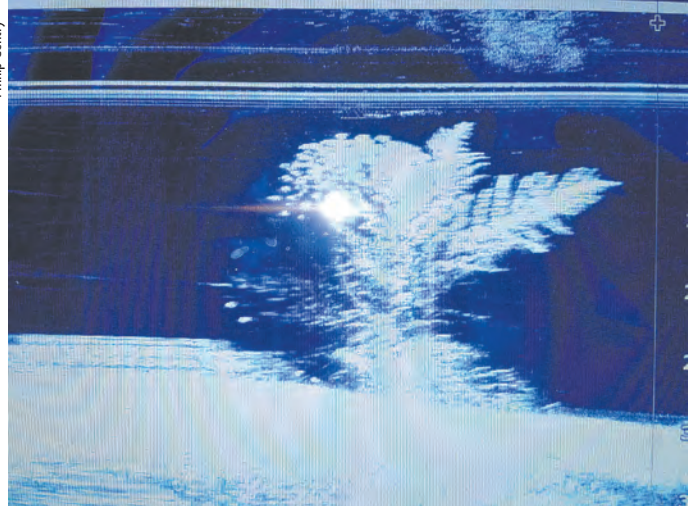
"The first place I'm going to look for crappie in the winter is out in front of boat docks" Mundy said. "Not just any dock; I want a dock that's on a steep bank, and I want a dock that looks like a fisherman lives there. A steep bank on land usually means there's a good drop-off in front of a dock, maybe even a creek channel or ditch. A dock that's owned by a fisherman will mean there's brush piles around it.

"In most situations, you'll find one or two separate piles of brush with some clear space in between. That's ideal for alternating between a two-rod presentation.

"I'll cast a 1/2-ounce jig either to one side or in the gap between piles" he said. "I just let it fall. When the line sinks about half way to the boat, I cast another jig straight across the brush pile and lay that rod on the deck while the jig sinks.

No. 2 is a purely vertical tactic, where Mundy sets up with his boat directly over the top of the structure and drops a tiny, 1/4-ounce Slabtail jig to the bottom on 4-pound test. Once the tiny jig hits the bottom some 20 feet or so beneath, Mundy engages the reel and slowly turns the handle. He compares it to ice fish-

Philip Gentry



During the winter, crappie tend to school tightly on structure or cover and will not move far to take a bait.

ing without ice.

"The extreme sensitivity of the Slabtail Series rod makes all the difference in detecting bites" he said. "The rod tip is so sensitive that the reeling of the handle makes it quiver. When it stops quivering, you set the hook."



Phillip Gentry of Waterloo, S.C., is host of "The Outdoor Show," a weekly radio podcast that can be seen at www.pgandboatgirl.com.

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Catch winter crappie with 3 cool tactics

Crappie pro Matthew Outlaw likes to fish for winter crappie in swampy areas off major lakes, close to places he typically sets up to hunt deer.

FISHING WINTER SWAMPS

A lot of crappie fishermen are also avid deer hunters, and Matthew Outlaw of St. Matthews, S.C., is no exception. About the time deer season begins winding down, he's ready to hit the water, and his favorite spots sometimes are not too far from his deer stands.

"In the swampy areas of many lakes in Florida and the Santee Cooper lakes where I fish the most, I love to go fish the swamps during the winter," Outlaw said. "Some people believe that crappie migrate in and out of the swamps with the seasons, but that is not true. Those fish have everything they need in that swamp, and they stay there year-round.

Outlaw suggests thinking about a swamp as a lake inside a lake. In winter, crappie will gravitate to the deeper ditches and creeks that feed the swamp. Those ditches may only be a foot or two deeper than the rest of the area, but fish will congregate there. Water levels also tend to drop during winter. That means, unless a severe drought that pushes all of the water out of the swamp, fish will stay in those ditches, and the lower-than-normal water will help concentrate them there.

"I like to fish for crappie a number of different ways in the swamp, but my preferred method is to use a slip cork and cast for them or use a jig pole and jig for them in those ditches and deeper areas," he said. "Just bundle up and pretend it's a summer day, and you'll be fishing the right way." ■

CRAPPIE HOTSPOTS ➤



Philip Gentry

A large advertisement for fishing gear. At the top, the word "VANFORD" is written in large, bold, black letters. Below it, "SUPER FAST" is written in red. The background shows a close-up of a fishing rod and a Shimano reel. The reel is silver and black with a green and red spool. The Shimano logo is visible on the reel. At the bottom right, the word "SHIMANO" is written in large, blue letters, and below it is the website "fish.shimano.com".

COOL JORDAN SLABS

Go deep for great crappie-fishing action

What's the most wonderful time of the year?

For crappie fishermen at North Carolina's Jordan Lake, December is not about the fabled migration of the jolly fat man, but the jolly fat crappie, as they filter towards the lake's main-river channel, where they feast on the shad leading the way.

Guide Greg Griffin of Apex, N.C., will be there with a sack full of minnows to deliver to all the good little girls and boys.

"December is the beginning of the best time to catch big numbers of crappie," said Griffin (919-434-4183), who runs Greggofish Guide Service. "They're settling into their winter pattern that usually lasts until the first of March. You don't have to finesse the fish this time of year — just get the bait down to them."

Griffin said Jordan crappie are generally caught in 18 to 28 feet of water, with the sweet spot typically 22 to 24 feet. He isn't

looking for fish in the channel itself, but rather the edges that rise into the desired depth. In those areas, he may find a bait-fish concentration on his sonar, but he's really looking for the crappie themselves, scattered on the bottom.

He begins in early December scanning both ends of the lake — the Haw River side or the Farrington Point end — where he believes the fish turn the earliest. Then, he focuses on the mid-lake area as the month progresses and fish meet in the middle.

"I'm using live minnows most of the time on a single-dropper rig, but you could use a Carolina rig," said Griffin. "I tie it on 15-pound braid with a 20-pound fluorocarbon leader. The hook should be tied on with a loop knot — so that the minnow can swim more freely about 20 inches above a 3/8-ounce bell sinker. I also like to vertical-jig a Jack Slap from Catch Outdoors when the fishing is good. It's a

Jordan Lake crappie move into a deep-water, winter pattern in December. Live minnows are the ticket to a holiday meal of slabs.



Greg Griffin

tail-spinner made out of tungsten.

"The fish are constantly roaming, looking for bait. If you're not marking crappie, but seeing an area with a lot of life, you can sit on it and wait for them to come to you, but, I don't exactly sit still. I'll bump the boat around a little to cover the area."

"I prefer to find fish on the bottom, because the bait placement is easier, but if I'm fishing an area like the (US 64) bridge in 35 feet of water, the fish will suspend, and it's a more precise matter of placing the bait just above them." ■

— Dusty Wilson

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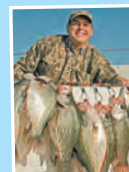
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DUEL
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DUCKS
■ By Jeff Burleson

DECEMBER SEASONS FEATURE THE FIRST BIG WAVE OF MIGRATING DUCKS, AND THEY WILL USE BIG EXPANSES OF WATER FOR FOOD, ROOSTING AND RESTING. HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR PUTTING THEM ON YOUR DUCK STRAP.

Trey Phillips



Duck seasons along the Eastern Flyway are among the shortest in the nation. While a few short segments come and go in the fall, it's not until December, when the final portion of the season arrives, that action really arrives.

For most waterfowlers, December is when the decoys fully make it out of the shed and 4 a.m. alarms are the norm. And while beaver ponds and flooded grain fields can look like Custer's last stand on some occasions, lakes in the Carolinas are often the first places ducks drop their feet on their annual migratory routes.

Except for wood ducks, the Carolinas' only resident duck species, most of the feathered take comes from Canadian provinces. November and December are the first months when the major migrations begin to produce large flocks of ducks in the flooded real estate of the South. In addition to the massive coastal sounds for which North Carolina and South Carolina are famous, the first flights find landing zones in the large system of lakes scattered across the central sections of both states.

The Eastern Flyway covers the entire eastern seaboard, but every waterfowl biologist and duck hunter understands there are minor flyways that ducks traditionally funnel through the Carolinas on their way south for the winter. These minor flyways follow the major river basins, which feature reservoirs that often end up hosting the first layover of these feathered foes.

North Carolina has many lakes within its boundaries, but the ones with the most waterfowl opportunities are in the Catawba, Yadkin or Roanoke River basins, which offer prime hunting grounds for ducks along the migratory route. While many may be famous for their excellent bass, crappie, and striper fishing, the duck hunting on these lakes can be exceptional during December when the first few waves arrive.



December ducks early in the migration will use bigger bodies of water, so hunters need to use a bigger spread of decoys.

Andrew Kibler



Ducks migrate in large flocks when they make their annual trip south, and when they arrive at a suitable stopping place, they will remain in places that have familiar faces. For hunters wanting to mimic something natural, a large flock of decoys is what helps these ducks commit when shedding air on the way down.

Trey Phillips, a life-long duck hunter and co-owner of the Clarendon Club in Summerton, S.C., said a large spread of decoys makes for some good hunting as the December segment of the season arrives.

"Large flocks of ducks show up looking for other large flocks of ducks, especially during the first part of the season in December," said Phillips (803-460-0797). "They don't spread out that much this time of year. When one group wants to come, they all seem to want to follow."

Ducks arrive in large groups and aren't especially interested in breaking up into smaller flocks. Safety in numbers is one reason behind this behavior, but another is that ducks haven't yet gone through distress from hunting pressure that can break them up into smaller groups. And ducks that show up in December may not be at their final wintering grounds.

"We traditionally get a good wave of ducks in December, but they don't stay around very long," Phillips said. "They will typically come in for a while and then leave when we get another cold snap. New groups normally take their place."

"But the ducks that migrate in are looking for large groups of birds to join and a large decoy spread definitely helps if you are hunting in a flooded impoundment or along the lake." ■

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South Carolina also has excellent waterfowl corridors associated with the Pee Dee, Broad and Savannah river systems, and of course, the Santee Basin, where the 190,000-acre Santee Cooper lakes are located. The Santee system uniquely spans a massive region, providing amazing places — from deep-water timber to shallow swamps covered in rich grass — for ducks to come each fall and winter.

Trey Phillips is co-owner and head waterfowl guide at the Clarendon Club in Summerton, S.C. He said the Santee Cooper ecosystem is ground zero for a massive annual migration of ducks, especially during November and December season.

“We are located just a few miles from the upper lake (Marion), between two national wildlife refuges, and we have over 200 acres of flooded corn ourselves, but we aren’t the only ones either with food for the ducks,” said Phillips (803-460-0797). “There are several thousand acres of flooded grain fields around the Santee Cooper system, planted entirely to attract waterfowl. If it weren’t for all of the impoundments around the lake, they would keep flying south to Florida and Georgia where they have hydrilla and other aquatic vegetation that ducks like to feed on. The impoundments retain many of the ducks in the area and makes the duck hunting better on the lake.”

Food is a necessity when ducks approach their first stopping points, because their energy reserves are often depleted after the long flight south. Reservoirs all over the Carolinas are lit-

tered with natural foods in shallow sections and in flooded grain fields around their perimeters, so the December portion of the season is not one to miss.

As it arrives, many ducks area also showing up for the first time, looking for protection and rich food sources.

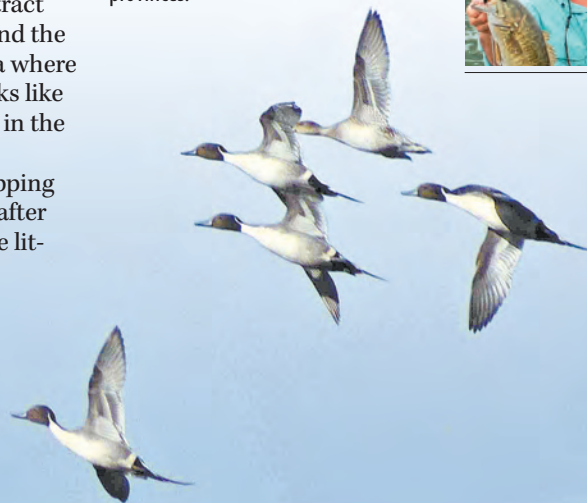
According to Phillips, the first arrivals will flock to the impoundments with heavy cover to roost under the stars.

“The ducks will roost on the lakes and in ponds with tall corn, but these ducks show up in huge flocks and are looking to feed shortly after arriving when day breaks,” Phillips said.

Ducks arriving in the Carolinas are interested in feeding up to replenish their energy reserves after the long trip south from the prairies and Canadian provinces.



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.



CAROLINAS' REMAINING DUCK SEASONS

North Carolina: Nov. 7-28, Dec. 19-Jan. 30, 2021.

South Carolina: Nov. 21-28, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2021.

Ducks will use lakes for feeding, resting, loafing and roosting. The first order of business is a high-energy food source, and of course, the flooded grain fields are easy places to find a stack of food, but many lakes may not have flooded corn nearby, and many hunters don't always have access to flooded fields. But these lakes will often have plenty of shallow margins fortified with grasses and nutritious aquatic vegetation that's more than good enough to appear on any duck's dinner table.

"The best places to hunt on these lakes during the early season are food sources that are usually around the lake edges and in the upper part of the lake," he said.

Every lake is a little different, depending on where it's located, but the basic lake structure is similar, with deep water near the dam and center channel and shallow, feeder creeks and the headwater drainages. It's there that many shallow flats are found, often bursting with emergent vegetation; otherwise



Jeff Burleson

The author shows off an albino widgeon killed near North Carolina's Lake Mattamuskeet, a big, open-water duck magnet.

known as the duck-feeding zones. These are places to set up a blind. Often, these sections of reservoirs are littered with beavers as well, who can find moving water and turn it into small ponds at the head of each creek. Sometimes, these beaver ponds are huge, with acres of aquatic vegetation full of duck food.

Food is always important for ducks, but often, later in the year when hunting pressure increases, ducks will utilize

the deeper, open-water areas for resting in large rafts during the day to avoid pressure that develops around the major food sources.

"A key point to take home (is), ducks will be looking for food hard as soon as they get here and the places on the lakes with the most food will harbor the most birds," Phillips said. ■



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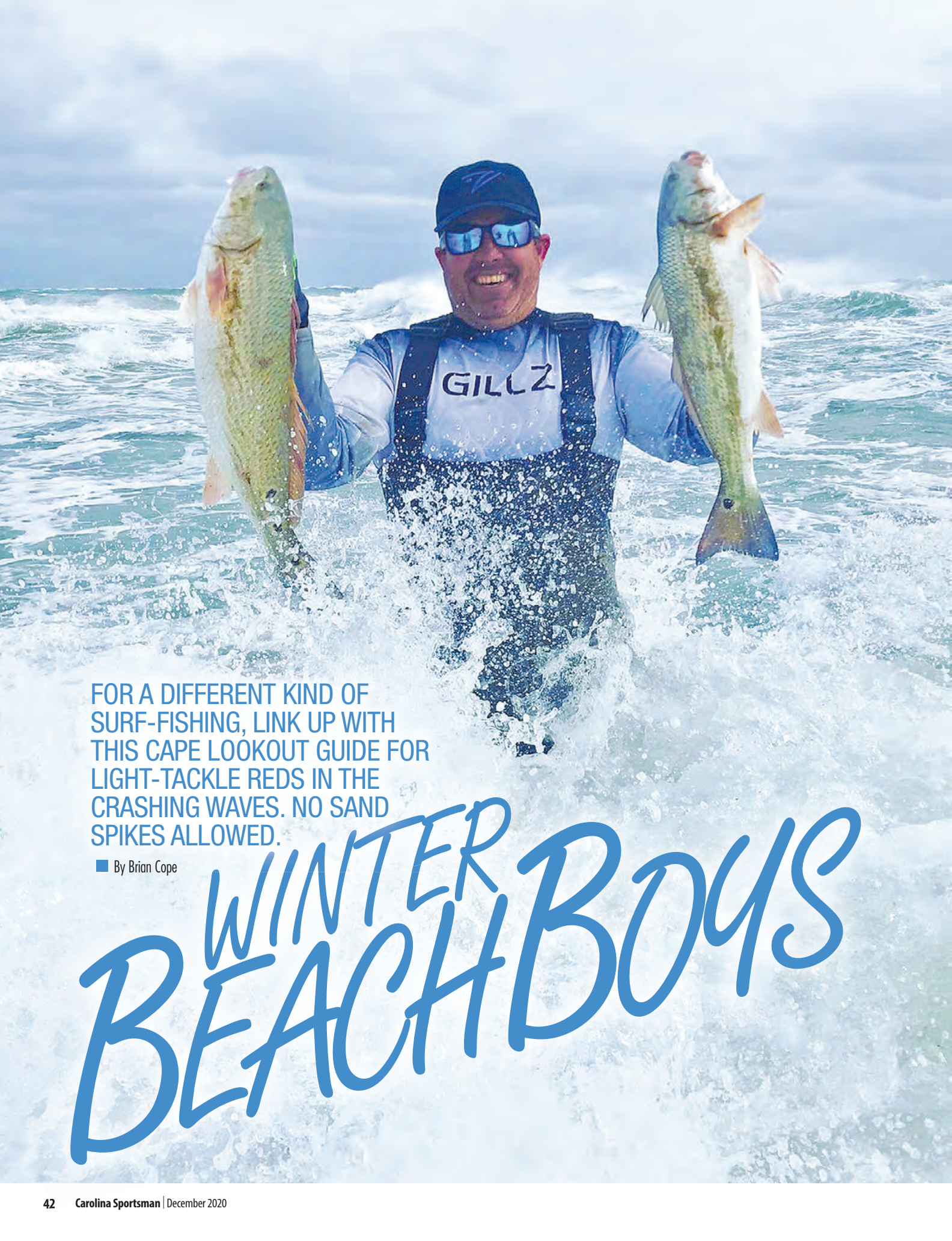
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■ By Brian Cope

WINTER BEACH BOYS

WHEN MOST PEOPLE THINK OF SURF-FISHING IN DECEMBER,

they think of long, stout surf rods, casting heavy weights and rigs from calf-deep water, then retreating to a big rod holder, a chair and a thermos of hot cocoa.

But that's not what's on Noah Lynk's mind this month. He surf-fishes for redfish with light tackle, and he wades out as far and deep as he can possibly go.

Lynk, of Noah's Ark Fishing Charters out of Harker's Island, N.C., also does something else that doesn't often enter most people's minds when thinking of surf fishing. He uses his boat to get to his favorite surf-fishing spots, and he catches a lot of red drum this time of year, especially when fishing in the rough surf of Cape Lookout.

"It's cold, and you're going to get wet," Lynk said. "This time of year, the surf is often very rough, and it's often very windy. At times, you'll have surf breaking over your head. You'll get water in your waders. You might even go for a tumble in the surf. But there is nothing I can think of that's better than fishing here this time of year. The fishing is that good. Every time I hook into a fish, I'm immediately reminded why I put myself up against these elements."

Lynk's plan of attack is pretty simple, as is his fishing strategy.

After beaching his boat, unloading the day's supplies, then anchoring his boat to avoid it being stranded at low tide or taken away as the tide rises, he heads to the

windward edge of the cape where the surf is the roughest, with waves cresting and crashing from opposite directions.

"It's really simple fishing," he said. "We just cast as far as we can, then reel in, letting the lure touch the bottom every now and then. Clarkspoons are great lures. They are heavy enough to cast a (long) distance, and their weight keeps them steady while retrieving them through the surf. These redfish are here in the shoals to look for food. So you don't have to do anything special to get them to bite," he said.

Instead of long, heavy surf rods and big reels, Lynk opts for 7½- and 8-foot rods and 3000 series spinning reels. This may seem light to some surf anglers, but these aren't bull redfish. These are mostly slot-sized fish, and in the cold, December surf, they put up a formidable fight, but a reel spooled with 12-pound braid is plenty stout enough to handle them.

Fishing this way, Lynk often breaks a cardinal rule by which many anglers swear. Adjusting your drag while fighting a fish is known as a big no-no, but he said you need to have that ability here to do just that.



Noah Lynk fights a redfish from the surf near Cape Lookout, a regular event for him as winter approaches and arrives.

“This is light tackle and fairly light line, and you need that to be able to cast the lures we’re using accurately,” he said. “You also need it to keep from horsing the fish in. You can use heavy surf rods, cast out big chunks of cut bait, then put the rod in a rod holder and just wait on a bite, but this is far more fun and challenging. You’re playing an active role when fishing this way, and there is nothing like it.

“But you have to know when to let the fish run and when to put pressure on it. Sometimes, you have to lighten your drag when you have a fish trying to run. If you can’t loosen your drag, you will get broken off at times. And if you aren’t willing to tighten your drag at times, you’ll simply get spooled,” he said.

And even though most of these fish are under 30 inches, Lynk said the occasional 40-inch-plus red drum shows up.

“You can’t be afraid to adjust your drag during the fight when that happens,” he said.

Lynk prefers a northeast wind, a rising tide, and fishing in the most turbulent water. But he said fish will bite just as good when those conditions aren’t present.

“A northeast wind is the most comfortable for anglers, and these fish will bite on any tide, usually,” he said. “As far as the turbulent water, that is where I always start. And it’s where the fish usually feed the most. The churning water stirs up the bottom and knocks sand fleas and baitfish around. The redfish know it and are constantly patrolling these areas. But sometimes, the bite can turn off there for whatever reason. Then we walk up the beach blind-casting into different spots until we find the schools.”

The surf around Cape Lookout is filled with slot-sized or better redfish, drawn in to feed on sand fleas.

No matter what the temperature or wind direction is, Lynk said waders and quick-dry clothing are essential for this trip. Your shirt and whatever you’re wearing under your waders will get wet. And you will be miserable all day long if you’re wearing any cotton, he said. ■



Brian Cope of Rembert, S.C., is a retired Air Force combat communications technician. He is web editor for www.carolinasportsman.com 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.



DESTINATION INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE — Cape Lookout is only accessible by boat or private ferry. The nearest public boat ramp is on Harkers Island. Get there by way of US 70 east from Morehead City to Harkers Island Road.

WHEN TO GO — Thanksgiving begins good surf fishing; it can last through the winter, depending on the weather.

BEST TECHNIQUES — With 3000 series spinning reels on 7½- to 8-foot rods, cast 1½-ounce Clarkspoons and similar lures into the surf and try different retrieve rates until the fish begin biting. Fish in the roughest part of the surf you can find.

FISHING INFO/GUIDES — Noah Lynk, Noah’s Ark Fishing Charters, 252-342-6911; Cape Pointe Marina, Harker’s Island, 252-728-6181

ACCOMMODATIONS — Cape Pointe Marina, Harker’s Island, www.capepointemarina.com; Harkers Island Marina, www.harkersmarina.com; Crystal Coast Tourism Authority, 800-786-6962, www.crystalcoastnc.org. See also Guides & Charters in Classifieds.

MAPS — Capt. Segull’s Nautical Fishing Charts, 888-473-4855, www.offshoremapping.com; Grease Chart, 252-560-6572, www.greasechart.com; GMCO Chartbook of North Carolina, 888-420-6277, www.gmcomaps.com.



Big artificial lures like this Halco C-Gar 120 will catch plenty of red drum in the Cape Lookout surf — plus an occasional speckled trout.



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Guide Noah Lynk said that, on occasion, some of his clients want to fish with live bait. He said they catch some fish, but far fewer than those using heavy lures like Clarkspoons. Another of his favorites is a 1½-ounce Shad Jig. He is also partial to the Halco C-Gar 120 and Halco Slidog 150, the former a topwater, the later a sinking, cigar-shaped lure. Both are solid, dense lures.

“With these lures, you can cast them far and retrieve them in heavy current without them getting blown around too much. And it’s easy to keep them touching the bottom,” Lynk said. “These fish are feasting mainly on sand fleas along the bottom, but they won’t pass up the chance to snag a bait-fish swimming by.”

On the first cast of each trip, Lynk tosses out one of the lures from shallow water, then reels it back steadily, letting it bounce off the bottom periodically. If he doesn’t get a strike that way, he’ll bounce the lure more on the next cast and retrieve. When that’s not working, he’ll jig the lure up and down, reeling in the slack as he goes.

“It can be a different retrieve that they’re looking for each day. Some days, you aren’t reeling in the lure at all. You’re just reeling in the slack, but moving the lure with the rod tip in a jiggling motion. Other days, you’re just straight retrieving it. Just remember, if one way isn’t working, try it a different way. The fish are here in big numbers this time of year, and they are feeding. You just have to figure out what is triggering them to bite each time,” he said. ■



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LOWCOUNTRY REDS

gang up in big schools on shallow mud flats

December is all about catching schooling redfish on Lowcountry flats for guide Rick Percy of Reel Chance Charters in Beaufort, S.C.

"In the late fall and winter, all the way through to spring, our estuary system is loaded with large mud flats that hold a foot or two of water at dead low tide," said Percy (803-535-6166). "This is perfect habitat for redfish. And in late fall into the winter, these redfish begin to school."

The schooling action is a survival technique for redfish. With most other gamefish and baitfish having headed offshore for the winter, redfish become primary targets of porpoises looking for an easy meal. So the redfish gang up in numbers and stay as shallow as possible to avoid becoming a snack.

Percy said it's not difficult to locate redfish, especially when the water is clear, which is often the case in December.

"Given calm winds and clear water, these redfish schools are not hard to find," he said. "We'll either see them push a wake as they move down the flat, or we'll simply see the dark color of the mass of fish."

Shallow mud flats across the coast of South Carolina's Lowcountry fill up with nice redfish this month.

And when anglers find the fish, Percy said it's time to hold the boat in position, keep as quiet as possible, and get ready to cast. The more noise coming from your boat, the fewer chances you'll have at enticing these fish to bite," he said.

Percy said a number of baits will work fine throughout the month. But he prefers one in particular.

"Cut mullet, shrimp, mud minnows, spoons and soft plastics all work. But my choice is free-lining a Gulp bait. It's hands-down the best bet for a hookup I have seen," he said.

This time of year, Percy said anglers can expect some hefty redfish coming over the boat rails.

"We have numerous days of putting 10 to 20 redfish in the 5- to 10-pound class in the boat during a four-hour trip this month," he said. "During most of our trips, we spend the last two hours of the outgoing tide and the first two hours of the incoming fishing this way. This gives us maximum exposure to the window of opportunity in finding the fish." ■

— Brian Cope

BORDER GANG REDS

Holes in backs of creeks will hold schools

The Carolinas may get some cold weather in December, but water temperatures are far from their annual lows. And the inshore fishery is hopping in December with redfish anglers barely sleeping a wink especially along the border between the two states in the Little River area.

One angler who loves December is Brandon Huskins of Any Tide Fishing Charters. December is the beginning of some of his best fishing of the year.

"Redfish start schooling in December; they get into big schools," said Huskins (843-877-7068). "The reds are congregated and real hungry back in the shallow creeks."

Huskins will fish both along the Intercoastal Waterway and the creeks, but he definitely prefers to jump between holes well back in the marshes along the North Carolina-South Carolina state line. On low tide, with minimal water available, redfish are congregated in big schools, but in small places.

"I hole-jump this time of year; I look for any places back in a creek along the sharp, 90-degree turns," he said. "You will have a shallow, sand flat, and then it will turn hard, and on these turns the water will be 6 to 10 feet deep," he said.

Reds position in these deep holes and will feed on about any type of bait that passes by or tries to swim into these area. The surrounding water may be shallow, but a few holes will hold plenty of fish. Huskins will bounce around from hole to hole and creek to creek until he finds a school of reds, and then he will spoon-feed them live or artificial baits.

"My go-to baits are mud minnows, or finger mullet if you can find them, on jigheads. I use what I call 'double trouble' — two mud minnows on the hook — the reds can't stand it," he said.

Huskins uses jigheads of several different colors; he has noticed that one color seems to produce more fish than others on certain days.

"Some days, a chartreuse jighead will outfish white 10-to-1, or it can be the opposite. Some jighead colors will just work better than others on certain days," he said, believing that water color



There's no such thing as "too far back" in a marsh creek for guide Brandon Hutchins in December. That's where he finds state-line redfish like this one.

and clarity makes the difference.

"It's something that catches their attention, and if it catches their attention quicker, you will get bit more often," he said. ■

— Jeff Bureson

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Speckled trout, along with redfish, are plenty willing to strike lures and eat baits in December, if you can present them slowly enough.



SLOWLY BUT SURELY

COLDER WEATHER MEANS SLOWING LURE, BAIT PRESENTATIONS

Brian Cope

December offers inshore anglers a lot of open water, because many folks would rather stay indoors. But those who don't mind the cold will find plenty of fish willing to bite. It's true that cold slows fish down, but they still eat, and you can catch your share by adjusting your tactics to meet their level of activity.

The fish slow down, so as anglers, we should, too.

Some anglers use a three-pronged approach this month, starting off by slowly working topwater lures, then switching to suspending lures, then using cut bait as the sun gets up.

Many anglers overlook popping lures for inshore fish, but they are perfect for

winter fishing. Unlike "walk-the-dog" type lures, poppers can be twitched once, then left to sit still for 10 seconds or longer. That's just what you need to entice slow-moving speckled trout and redfish. Faster lures like Super Spooks must be worked fairly quickly to get the right action, and that gets them out of the strike zone too quickly this time of year.

PERFECT POPPERS

Popping lures, like the Rebel Pop-R, are designed to stay in the strike zone longer, and that's perfect for winter fishing. These lures offer the option of a feather-enhanced rear treble hook, which is a great option for cold water. As the lure sits still between twitches, the feather

moves ever so slightly, giving the impression of a living baitfish.

Popping lures can be effective over any depths, especially when worked above flooded oyster rakes and along grass lines. Working them slowly is the key. However, if it's an unseasonably warm day, or if the fish are being unusually aggressive, popping lures can also be walked in a zig-zag motion very similar to regular walk-the-dog type lures.



Brian Cope of Rembert, S.C., is a retired U.S. 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.

SUSPEND REALITY

Suspending lures like the Badonk-A-Donk are also great winter offerings. Anglers can work them as slowly as they want, and their ability to suspend in the water column can trigger strikes from fish that aren't committing to topwater lures. A slight twitch followed by a long pause, or a few sharp twitches followed by a pause, can prove too much for specks and redbfish to resist.

As with popping lures, working these suspending lures above flooded oysters is always a great option. Using them around the mouths of feeder creeks — or even cast into those creeks and worked out to the main waterway is also good.

BAIT BUSTERS

Another good option involves a more passive way of fishing, but it is just as effective. Cut bait fished on the bottom works wonders. It doesn't require fish to exert any effort to chase it down, and it

gives off plenty of smell. The smell is the main attractant, unlike the two lure types mentioned above, which rely mainly on movement to entice strikes.

Any kind of cut bait works pretty well in December. One thing to remember is that bigger isn't always better, and that's especially true when the water is cold. The few baitfish that are present throughout the winter are generally small, so it's best to stick with smaller baits. That also goes for the lures mentioned above, which are available in a variety of sizes.

Traditionally, anglers have used Carolina rigs to keep their bait in place, but a growing number of anglers are opting to use jigheads instead. This cuts down on the amount of terminal tackle needed, and it also allows anglers to use less weight. That makes for less-noisy presentations and more-accurate casting toward downed trees and sunken debris, which often holds black drum as well as redbfish and trout.

ADD ODOR TO LURES

While cut bait has built-in odor, popping and suspending lures lack this feature. But artificial scents like Pro-Cure Super Gel will give those lures that missing piece of the puzzle. You might think these products would immediately wash off once the lure hits the water, but they go on thick and stay put for quite a while.

Pro-Cure is made of 100% baitfish, so the smell is natural. Sometimes it adds that extra touch that will convince curious fish to take a bite. It's not uncommon this time of year for fish to follow a topwater or suspending lure all the way to the boat, then swim away without striking at it. Adding scent can often seal the deal on these wary fish. ■

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LUNKER LINES

David Fritts

The back ends of creeks can hold a lot of bass in December, especially before the weather really gets cold and bass move deep.



CATCH DECEMBER BASS

IT'S NOT WINTER YET, AND BASS AREN'T ACTING LIKE IT

If we really think about January and February being cold, winter months when bass fishing in the Carolinas is often very difficult, then December and March are months when bass should act similarly, living in the same kind of water and feeding the same amount.

December is actually a good month if it doesn't get too cold, too soon. I really like to fish in December — when I'm not deer-hunting — because the fish are up, and they're catchable. They're going to be shallow, but at the same time, close to deep water. If a cold front move through, it's going to shut things down. Doesn't that sound like March?

In December, a lot of fish are going to be in the creeks, and the backs of creeks

can be really good. I'm probably going to start by going about halfway back and fishing my way to the backs of the creeks. I want to fish in places when my boat can be sitting in 15, 18, 25 feet of water, but where I can still hit the bank with a cast. Those are the kinds of places I like to fish. If I was fishing High Rock, my home lake in North Carolina, I'd start by looking for the clearest water, which would be in Flat Swamp and Second creeks. I'd go back to the bridges — NC 8 across Flat Swamp and Bringles Ferry Road across Second — and fish back.

HIT THE ROCKS

Rocks are awfully good this month, plus riprap, bridges and bluff walls. We don't have a lot of bluff walls in our Carolina

lakes, but fishing them is a really good idea when you can find them. Fish will move vertically to feed in December because the water is colder and they don't want to exert a lot of effort feeding.

When I fish bluff walls, I like to parallel them so I can keep my baits at a certain depth. I will make little parallel casts, sort of the same kinds of casts you make when you're fishing riprap. If you can find some little points sticking out off those walls, or big, isolated rocks all by them-



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, Lews, Minnkota, Lowrance and Berkley.

selves, those are great. You just have to figure out how the bass are positioned. When there's a lot of current, they're going to be facing the current.

If the water stays warm well into the month, and if it's up and not falling, you can probably catch bass on a Chatterbait or a spinnerbait, but these kinds of patterns are much better for crankbaits. I like to fish a Berkley Digger 14.5, and little crankbaits also work. This is the time of year when flat-sides like my Frittsides are at their best. The fish like a bait with a real tight action, because they're not as aggressive. If you find them aggressive, you can catch 'em on a Digger, which has a harder, crawfish action. You just have to fish around and figure out what they want.

Creek channels are places you can find them. Sunken roadbeds or railroad trestles can be great. They're the kinds of places where you can be sitting in 15 feet of water, throwing into 6 or 8 feet. Most of the bass you catch in December will be 3 to 10 feet deep, and they should be ganged up. When you catch one, there will probably be several more around, so you need to keep fishing those places.

DOWNSIZE TACKLE

When it comes to tackle, I'll be using a crankbait rod, but I'll downsize a little. I'll be using my signature series Lew's Perfect Crankbait rod in a 6-foot-8 or 7-foot length. Using a slightly shorter rod sort of helps, because you can be much more accurate casting, and that really helps if you are fishing a bluff wall. And you don't need those long, long casts because you aren't fishing way offshore and extremely deep.

I still fish with a Lew's BB1 reel spooled with 10-pound Sensation monofilament. Any kind of mono is going to be hard to beat, because mono has less stretch, and that's what you need with a crankbait. Fluorocarbon has too much stretch to fish a crankbait. Some fishermen might think 10-pound test is light, but you need it with a crankbait. Your bait will have more action, and it will run to its maximum depth, which is an advantage, and you need all the advantages you can get.

SHAD COLORS RULE

Most bass are still concentrating on shad; they haven't moved to crawfish yet, so the shad colors like honey shad, oatmeal cream pie and even spicy mustard are good. I'm a big fan of shad colors in December.

Another plus for bass fishing in December is that it's a great time to get your line stretched by a striped bass if you're fishing a lake that has stripers. They might get on the same places that bass do this month, especially bluff walls. Mostly, you'll find them in areas that have a lot of bait.

So when you get a few deer tags filled, and you get a day off on a warm day, don't hesitate to hitch your bass boat to the back of your truck and head for the lake. If the weather is good, the fishing should be. ■



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COOKING ON THE WILD SIDE

Jerry Dilsaver

FISH BALLS

A PERFECT DISH TO SERVE AT HOLIDAY GATHERINGS AS APPETIZER OR MAIN COURSE



Skewerless wahoo kabobs go great with veggies and can be served with light bread or blue corn tortilla chips. **INSET:** Wahoo fishing off the coast of the Carolinas hits its annual peak in the fall.

The recipe selected for December for many years has been something special for the holidays, usually a nice alternative to the usual dishes for holiday gatherings, and something easy to prepare that those who especially enjoy it can have it again for snacks during college football bowl games. This recipe follows that trend and can be made very quickly. It also lends itself to being jump-started with a variety of peppers or spices to please those with more robust appetites.

For years, I have been amazed at how quickly we complete our trip around the sun and the Christmas season draws near. Unfortunately, that isn't the case this year. Since March, 2020 has dragged along at a pace comparable to molasses running uphill during a blizzard. I know we're wanting 2020 to end as quickly as possible, and the end is finally near. This is a simple recipe that can be made in small batches for small gatherings and is something to appreciate while waiting for 2021 to arrive.

This recipe is also healthy. The primary parts are fish and

rice. I prefer to use grilled fish, and that keeps you outside a little more and is even healthier. It also works well with baked or broiled fish and even with fried fish as long as it isn't overcooked. This relies on the fish's moisture to work with the moisture in the rice to hold the mixture together. You can use leftover fish and rice, but you'll have to warm them or add a little something to make them moist so they'll bind.

After a December day afloat or in the field, it's nice to spend time with friends and family, and this is a good snack for it. My wife likes it as a meal and jokingly calls it sushi balls.

This was first made with king mackerel after a particularly productive trip, but make it with your favorite fish or the one you have the most of. Use some of the options and your favorite dipping sauces to tune it for your family and friends. They are what really matters and I believe you'll all enjoy this.

This is simple to make, can be made with leftovers and works for a variety of occasions. Sometimes it takes folks a few bites to warm up to it, but there is rarely any left on the plate. If you're a fish eater, you should enjoy this. ■

FISH BALLS

This is a simple, quick and easy recipe. It came about many years ago as a way to use leftover fish and has stood the test of time. We like it enough we now cook fish for it and add a couple of extra fillets for meals. The only disagreement we have ever had about it is that I want to make it spicy, and my wife likes it mild. She likes to call it sushi balls and only dips it in soy sauce, while I want some wasabi, too.

This recipe is the basics and suited for her and others with mild palates. The only option we used was lime-flavored tortilla chips instead of plain. It's a step in the right direction, but not enough for me. For those of you who enjoy a little spice in your food, one or more of the things listed as options should bring it up to snuff.

The key to getting this to bind is having moist fish and freshly cooked rice. If you use leftover fish and/or rice, warm it slowly in the oven or microwave it on a low power. You're just trying to warm it, not cook it any more. I mix it with my hands, and if it isn't sticking to my fingers, it needs a little something to help bind it. I prefer it without anything extra, but a drizzle of oil or a touch of mayonnaise will help the fish and rice bind.

Yes, I mix this with my hands. It's a whole lot like mixing meatloaf. I don't have a food processor, so I mix it until my fingers begin cramping. When you add the pepper and sesame seeds — and anything you choose from the options list — spread them around rather than pouring them into the bowl in a single blob. It will help them get mixed thoroughly. Don't tell anyone you licked your fingers when taking them out, and wash your hands before proceeding.

I like to prepare this a little in advance and put it in the refrigerator for a few hours to cool. I

don't know it enhances the flavor, but it makes the balls firm and easier to handle. Put them on your plate with a serving fork, but they're more fun and better to eat with your fingers.

This basic recipe is good as it stands, but welcomes other ingredients to make the flavor bolder. I don't use any salt, as there is salt in the Cavender's. You can add salt to make it sharper, more pepper or red pepper to make it spicier, cook the fish in blackened seasoning to make it spicier, add some crushed garlic to keep vampires away, a little liquid smoke to add a smoked taste, some cheese if you like cheese, or whatever you would like to do. We make it throughout the year, whenever there is enough fish left over, but it is still requested for Christmas and New Years parties, Christmas Eve snacks, football game snacks and more. Not only is this simple to make, it's pretty tasty too.

Add a few dipping sauces from mild to wild for serving to a mixed group. My favorites are Asian Chili Sauce and one I make by mixing sriracha sauce and ranch dressing. The sriracha/ranch sauce can be varied in itself by using more or less sriracha sauce. When it's pink, it's milder and the redder it gets, the warmer it gets. I have one friend that squirts sriracha sauce directly on them and another that likes seafood cocktail sauce. My wife prefers milder flavor and likes soy and teriyaki sauce. Heck, the balls can be eaten plain too. It should taste good with whatever is your favorite fish sauce. Enjoy! ■

PREPARATION:

Cook some fish or use previously cooked fish and flake a cup full. I used grilled king mackerel for this batch. I rubbed the grilled king mackerel lightly with Lite Italian dressing and sprinkled it with coarse-ground black pepper and Cavender's All Purpose Greek Seasoning, then cooked it a few minutes on each side until barely done. Be careful not to overcook the fish.

Combine a cup of fish and two cups of rice in a bowl and mix well. Add the sesame seeds, pepper to taste and any of the optional ingredients you choose and mix again. Crush tortilla chips in a bowl. Crush to small chunks and crumbs, not to powder.

Form a ball of the fish and rice mixture between an inch and 1½ inches and roll it in the crushed tortilla chips, then place in a container that can be refrigerated. Repeat until all the fish and rice mixture is rolled into balls. I try to store the balls on a single level, but if you need to stack them, separate the levels with a piece of wax paper.

The fish balls can be eaten immediately, but will be soft.

Refrigerating them stiffens them up and makes them easier to handle. Serve the balls on a dish, with several of your favorite dipping sauces.

This is a great hors d'oeuvre or snack. It is versatile and can be made mild — like this recipe — or spiced up by adding spicy fish or one or several of the optional ingredients. It is excellent for family gatherings, parties, tailgating or watching sports in a hunting/fishing lodge, man cave or the den. My two favorite dipping sauces are Asian Sweet Chili Sauce and a ranch dressing/sriracha sauce mixture. My wife prefers the milder taste of a little soy or teriyaki sauce. We also like to have a bowl of tortilla chips with it. ■

INGREDIENTS:

1 cup flaked cooked fish

2 cups cooked rice

2 tbsp sesame seeds

½ cup crushed tortilla chips

Coarse ground black pepper (to taste)

Your favorite dipping sauce(s)

Options: More fish, different spice rub for fish, brown rice, flavored tortilla chips, grated cheese, Liquid Smoke, extra pepper, chopped onion, garlic, red pepper, ground chipotle or jalapeno peppers, chopped jalapeno peppers and more...



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

SMALL CRAFT ADVISORY

Phillip Gentry

Live bait is sometimes the perfect combination of a slow, natural presentation that will get bites in cold weather.



FISHING WHEN IT'S COLD

BE WARM, SAFE AND SUCCESSFUL WHEN YOU'RE IN A KAYAK

Phillip Gentry

Winter is one of the best times to fish anywhere in the Carolinas. The weather is more stable than during transitional seasons like spring and fall, and angling pressure and boat traffic are lower. Likewise, a number of fish species readily bite all winter.

Before you load up the yak and rods and head for the nearest water, consider a few things before you start trying to figure out a fishing pattern for what's biting.

The biggest drawback to winter fishing is the temperature. Except for an occasional warming trend, it's cold. But in today's day and age of state-of-the-art cold weather apparel and gear, taking the winter off from fishing is a big mistake.

Great fishing is possible, but being comfortable a matter of preparation. Here are a few tips to get you on the right path.

WEAR WOOL

The insulating factor of wool is unbeatable, even with some of today's synthetic fabrics. Wool may be heavier, but it won't adsorb water and gets the nod when it's cold. Caps, socks, neck gaiters — any-

where you can put wool with the possible exception of long johns — is a sure way to stay warm. The best way to defeat the itchy feeling of wool underwear is to wear synthetic stuff below the waist and use wool as the second layer.

GET NEOPRENE

The same material that scuba divers wear underwater is readily available in many garments for above-water use. Neoprene pants, jackets, gloves and even boots are available. These materials are waterproof, very warm and, as a bonus, the air-encapsulation process used in creating neoprene also makes it highly buoyant, just in case.

WEAR YOUR PFD

This should be year-round advice for kayak anglers, but is a necessity for winter kayak fishing. An auto-inflating PFD typically offers the most comfort, especially over several layers of clothing. Attach a plastic whistle to the front so you'll have a way to signal for help should you wind up in the water, away from your kayak. Having a short, sharp knife

that can also be attached to your PFD is a great idea if you need to cut rigging, rope or fishing line should you capsize and become entangled.

WEATHER WATCHING

Planning your kayak fishing trip around the weather has two-fold benefits during the winter. It's not unusual to have a moderate or even warm day in December. Warmer weather in the midst of cold weather can cut on the bite, just like fishing on a cool, overcast summer day. Also, check the wind speed. The more wind, the greater the threat of capsizing becomes. It's also much colder, even on a moderate day, when the wind is blowing versus a calm wind day.

CHANGE OF CLOTHES

A change of clothes, stored in a dry bag,



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.

can be a lifesaver should you take a plunge in cold water. It's also nice to have a dry towel to warm up your hands, face or arms during breaks in the fishing. Most anglers never consider using a fish towel any time of year, but having one in the winter can give your hands a break from handling cold, wet objects like paddles, rods, gear, and even fish.

BRING THE HEAT

Gas or propane heating devices may not be practical for kayak angling unless you want to take a break and hit the bank for a spell to get warm. Another option is to use chemical heaters to warm extremities. Hand and foot warmers react to oxygen and begin a slow, steady heat release.

Tucked inside a pair of gloves, boots or inside a jacket, they can create warmth and help blood flow. A good place to look for these products is in the first-aid aisle of your grocery store or pharmacy. Several companies make chemical heating products complete with skin adhesives to stick to sore or injured areas. They work great for heating extremities as well.

CONTROL MOISTURE

It may sound strange to think about controlling moisture when the goal is to stay dry from outside water sources. The truth is, inside moisture — your body's own perspiration — can make you the most uncomfortable. Layering up may feel great at daylight, but what happens when it's time to haul the kayak several hundred feet to the water, paddle for a mile or so, or load/unload the boat from the vehicle? Strenuous exercise can make you sweat, and this moisture has nowhere to go if you're bundled up.

As mentioned with the wool, consider wearing undergarments that will wick away moisture from your skin but not cause you to be cold. It's also nice to layer up for cold early on in the trip and then shed some of those layers as the day wears on and temperatures begin to rise. ■

WINTER FISHING TIPS

While it's good to be warm and comfortable on the water during the winter, it's great to be warm, comfortable and catching fish. Here are a few winter-centric things to keep in mind when fishing in cooler water.

Slow down. Rather than casting and winding to keep your bait in motion and off the bottom, try tactics that focus on slower presentations. This includes drop-shotting, bottom-bouncing, jigging, and dead-sticking.

Downsize baits. Some fishing may be tempted to eat one big bait in colder water, but most fishes' metabolism slows down in winter. This means most fish will eat smaller baits and feed less often. To meet this need, try downsizing your baits. Instead of 4- and 5-inch artificial baits, switch to lighter tackle, smaller diameter line and 2- to 3-inch baits. This may require a little more finesse getting a fish to the boat, but it's better than not getting bites.

Live bait. When a fish's metabolism slows down, often the best way to get a bite is by using something that looks, tastes, smells and acts like an easy meal. There is not better "easy meal" offering than a live bait presented directly to a fish's face. ■

BEST BETS

NORTH CAROLINA

WHAT — Crappie

WHERE — High Rock Lake

HOW — Winter crappie love to bunch up around structure in big numbers during cold weather. Boat docks are some of the most-available and easy-to-fish structures. Look to the darkest, deepest areas under docks. Avoid getting on the dock; a kayak will allow you to get much closer than a larger boat. The smaller the jig the better. Some anglers prefer double jigs in ¼-ounce on 4-pound test. Pay attention anywhere you get a bite as there are likely many more fish in close proximity.

LAUNCH — www.ncwildlife.org/boating/where-to-boat/

INSIDER TIP — Bright, sunny days are better than overcast days. Even in winter, sunshine will push crappie deep into the darkest area of the dock.

SOUTH CAROLINA

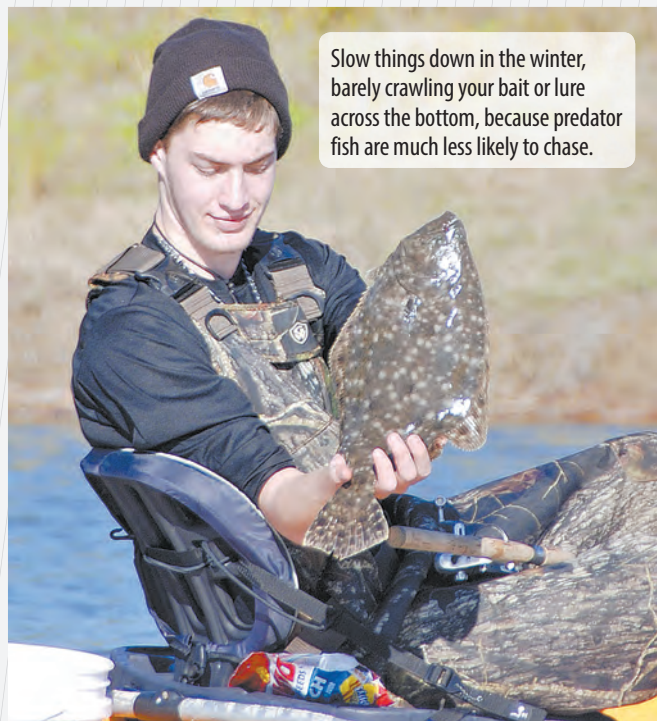
WHAT — Redfish

WHERE — Inshore waters around Beaufort.

HOW — Shallow bays off secondary creeks provide cover from predators and warm quicker on sunny days. Redfish school tightly for protection but this also makes the entire school spooky. Watch for movement in clear water to give away the location of the school, then cast ½-ounce jigs paired with scented plastics ahead of the school. Sometimes not even moving the bait is the best way to get bit.

LAUNCH — www2.dnr.sc.gov/ManagedLands/boatramp/boatrampsearch

INSIDER TIP — Plan on going on a long paddle to search for redfish. Don't waste time fishing blind until you locate a school of fish. Once a big school is located, you'll have plenty of opportunity for fishing action.



Slow things down in the winter, barely crawling your bait or lure across the bottom, because predator fish are much less likely to chase.

Philip Gentry

SANTEE STRINGER

Terry Madewell

The Santee Cooper lakes' deep brush piles hold plenty of big bream in December for anglers like Dean Ilderton.



DECEMBER'S DEEP BREAM

BIG, BULL BREAM BEGIN PILING INTO DEEP, WOODEN COVER THIS MONTH

Terry Madewell

December is a month when cold-weather fishing patterns emerge, and many are very reliable in terms of productivity. Knowledgeable anglers cash in on this reliability to consistently catch quality fish.

The headliner on this list may surprise some, but not diehard bream anglers. December is prime time to catch limits of huge bream in short order. Action is so fast that anglers can often land doubles of boss bream with a two-hook rig.

ON DEEP WOOD

It's no secret that bream and woody habitat are a "hand-in-glove" match, but it rises to a new level at Santee Cooper

during December.

Kevin Davis, the owner of Blacks Camp, said that in late November and through December, a mass exodus of bream from shallow water occurs; they flood into deep brush and other wooden cover.

"A lot of the habitat bream prefer is woody cover in any depth of water, but in December, it's the deep brush where bream congregate in vast numbers during the cold weather," said Davis (843-753-2231). "Much of this man-made cover was originally intended for crappie, but it's ideal for fat, wintertime bream. This fishery is so consistent that anglers target bream on the brush; they're not just a bonus for crappie fishermen."

Dean Ilderton of St. George, S.C., targets

big bream year-round and fishes both lakes out of Blacks Camp.

"The water temperature is a key, and with consistently cold weather, bream move to the deep brush, and with electronics, we can precisely target these hotspots," he said.

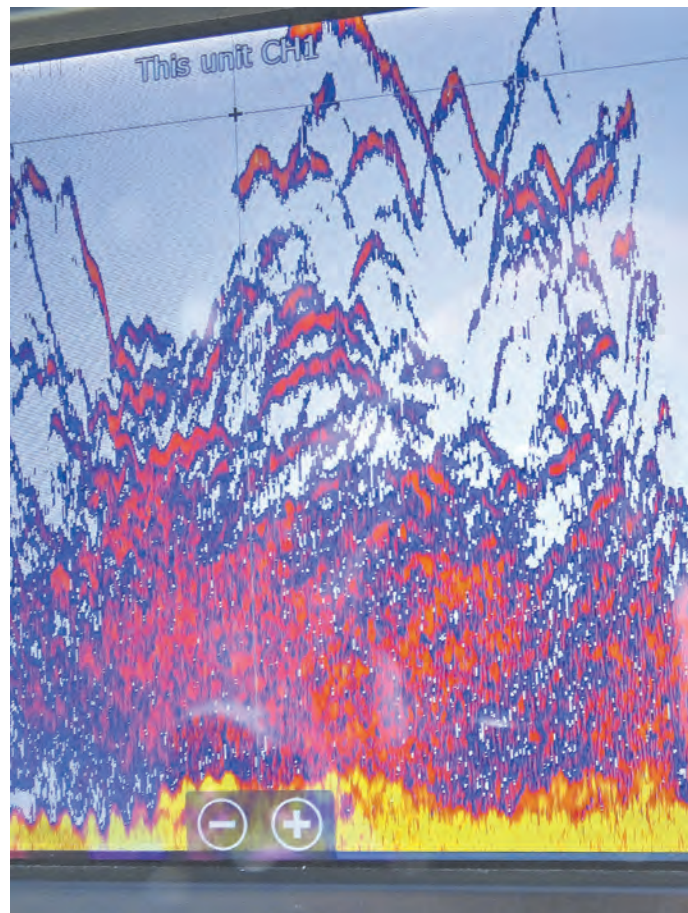
FISH ATTRACTORS

Some excellent targets are the Santee Cooper Country public fish attractors.



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.

This is what a brush pile loaded with bream will look like on your electronics in December.



Terry Madewell

They marked by buoys, and their locations are listed on the S.C. Department of Natural Resources website (www.dnr.sc.gov/fish/fishattract/fishattr.html). SCDNR has recently refurbished these sites with new brush, making them even better for big bream.

Ilderton said most of the bream will be congregated from 15 to 30 feet deep.

“A gradual depth transition occurs during November as some bream begin to move into brush at 10- to 20-foot depths,” he said. “But by December, the prime bream action is on brush in 20 to 30 feet of water, because huge bream cram into these deeper areas.”

Ilderton fishes with a tight-line rig, using a No. 4, extra-light wire gold Aberdeen hook with a heavy split-shot a few inches above. He loads the hook with a fat cricket and drops it to just above the top of the brush.

“When we first get on the brush, it may take a short minute for the bream to move out of the brush, but once they do, they’ll usually very aggressive on the bite,” he said. “Usually, they’re so aggressive a two-hook rig will work and produce doubles on huge bream. When it’s right, you’ll get bit while dropping the rig down, and it often won’t get to the targeted depth. That’s a ton of fun.”

Davis calls the rig the “double-hook, drop-shot, bream-killer rig.” He’ll tie in two extra-light No. 4 gold Aberdeen hooks about a foot apart, beginning about 8 inches above a heavy split-shot pinched onto the end of the line.

“The light hooks can be pulled free from the brush and bent back into shape, and the split-shot on the end can be pulled off if it snags on the brush without breaking the 8-pound test line,” Davis said. “This often saves me from having to replace a complete rig.”

These bream will move to other brush piles, and Ilderton said don’t linger long at any one place you set up if you’re not getting plenty of bites.

“Despite the low water temperatures, the bream bite is typically aggressive,” he said. “Watching your graph, you’ll see the bream swarming around the top and edges of the brush when you start catching them. The competition for the crickets is fierce, and thus, the opportunity to catch them two at a time.”

Both Davis and Ilderton said because you can limit quickly on big bream, it’s a good idea to have a bucket of minnows so you can finish the day crappie fishing — another good December option on deep brush.

Both Davis and Ilderton said because you can limit quickly on big bream, it’s a good idea to have a bucket of minnows so you can finish the day crappie fishing — another good December option on deep brush.

BIG CAT SHOOTOUT

Another big-fish opportunity in December is catfish, and the 2020 Big Cat Shootout is set for Dec. 10-11, 2020, out of Blacks Camp. Entry fee is \$500 per

team; the two-day tournament has a 100% payback.

“The payout has been around \$7,500 for first place each of the first two years, and we’ve had some awesome catches weighed,” Davis said. “We’ve selected this time of the year, because historically, the late-November and December time frame produces a lot of huge catfish.”

Tournament info can be found on the Blacks Camp Big Cat Shootout Facebook page or by calling 843-753-2231. ■

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HEAD FOR THE MOUNTAINS

Robert Satterwhite

A big bonus of trout fishing during the winter is that big fish, like this brown trout, aren't shy about biting.



WELCOME THE WINTER

CONDITIONS MAY BE TOUGH, BUT TROUT DON'T COMPLETELY SHUT DOWN

Bob Satterwhite

Winter is a time of stark beauty in the mountains, a time when the dominant colors are blue, gray, brown and black, when streams run full and clear and icy cold and when a warm, sunny day is an event and a blessing for a trout fisher.

Although spring is undoubtedly the ideal trout-fishing season, winter fishing does have its merits. What most fishers discover is that they catch fewer but larger fish. The downside, particularly during the bitterly cold months of January and February, is that the fishing can test an angler's mettle and patience. The key to successful winter fishing is to use more nymphs and fewer dry flies.

With fewer hatches coming off, nymphs are the type of food that trout, particularly large trout, see and prefer. When a big nymph floats past a trout, all he sees is one big mouthful of protein.

The late Mike Terrell of Sylva, N.C., a guide and lifelong trout fisher, once said he liked winter trout fishing, "because streams are less crowded, and you aren't bothered by bugs. Only the hearty get out in cold weather, and the bigger fish are more active.

"Some of the biggest trout I've caught were during a snowstorm," Terrell said. "January and February are absolutely the best times to catch trophy fish."

DEEP AND SLOW

When nymph-fishing, Terrell kept his nymphs close to the bottom of a pool or run and fished at a slower pace.

"You have to remember that everything slows down in the winter," he said. "Strikes will be more subtle, sometimes little more than a slight hesitation of the line."

One of Terrell's techniques was to work upstream and let a nymph dead-drift to the bottom, then stripping the fly in short spurts.

"If you see a trout following the fly but not taking it, freeze," he said. "If the trout starts to turn away, give the line a jerk. That will make the trout think that the nymph is trying to escape, and he'll usually strike."

Terrell used an orange or olive Stimulator as an attractor and a small Winter Midge or Griffith's Gnat as a dropper when dry-fly fishing.

"The second fly should trail about 12 to 16 inches behind the main fly," Terrell said, "but you have to be careful not to

'drown' the dropper."

KNOW THE FISH

To get results in the winter, fishing techniques must adapt to the weather and to the fish. Trout are less likely to move when the water is 40 degrees or colder, so feeding lanes will be much narrower. The amount of time fishing one spot should be doubled, even tripled. Fish an area thoroughly, move a few feet, and continue casting, using the roll cast to get best results.

Jason Cole, co-owner of Smoky Mountain Fly Fishing in Cherokee, N.C., fishes all winter. He's caught fish on cold, rainy days, and he's caught fish when the snow was pouring down.

"It depends on what you can stand," he said. "The fish will bite regardless."

Cole avoids nearby park streams in the winter. "It's tough fishing," he said. Instead, he fishes the delayed-



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.

harvest waters of the Nantahala River in Swain County and the Tuckasegee River in Jackson County. Big waters are more dependable, and these big waters are well-stocked.

GO SMALL

The lower the water temperature, Cole said, the more lethargic the fish. Flies must be placed as close to them as possible. Mostly, Cole said, he fishes with small midges, small caddis flies, Blue Winged-Olives and Woolly Boogers. The midges, he said, do especially well on the delayed-harvest streams.

Leaders usually are 9 feet, or less frequently, 7½ feet, with 6X or 7X tippets. Cole often uses a tandem rig: a No. 18 Blue-Winged-Olive on top and a No. 24 midge tied on an 18-inch tippet as a dropper.

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

For winter dry-fly fishing, patterns should be small: nothing larger than a No. 20 or No. 18.

Whatever the weather brings, one thing is certain. Trout streams will be waiting. The fishing will be good as always — depending on your own definition of good. Trout must eat

“
Some of the biggest trout I’ve caught were during a snowstorm. January and February are absolutely the best times to catch trophy fish.
”

regardless of the weather. And true trout fishers must fish regardless of the weather.

DELAYED-HARVEST STOCKINGS

All delayed-harvest waters in North Carolina’s mountains received a second stocking the first week in November. These streams also were stocked the first week in October. With the streams loaded with trout, fishing should be excellent through the winter. Delayed-harvest streams will not be stocked again until March. ■



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

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

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

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

AVAILABLE PRODUCTS:
The 2021 PrimeTimes Wall Calendar. \$13.95 (plus \$4 s&h). Know the best days, best times, and their relative strengths for all of 2021 with this information-packed, full-color, 11-inch by 17-inch, graphic peaks

and-valleys forecaster. Includes rise and set times for the sun and moon, space to log your catches, “Timely Tips,” plus fish and game symbols showing you each month’s don’t-miss periods. Also includes exclusive summary charts revealing the best and worst days of 2021, the year’s best periods, and more. Comes with FREE 2021 Astro Tables pocket calendar, which sells separately for \$8.95, plus \$3 s&h.
Book: “How to Know When to Go” by Rick Taylor. \$14.95 (plus \$4 s&h). 100 pages, 43 illustrations. A comprehensive look at the main factors influencing fish and game activity periods, plus how to devise an effective when-to-go game plan using any year’s PrimeTimes calendars. Individual assessments of bass, panfish, deer, turkey, and more.

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2020 BEST DAYS				LUNAR PERIODS			
POOR	FAIR	GOOD	EXCL. VALUE	TIMES OCCURRING AT NIGHT ARE SHADED			
MOON RISE	PRIMARY MOON OVERHEAD	MOON SET	PRIMARY MOON UNDERFOOT				
Tue 1	58	6:06 pm	11:47 pm - Midnight	8:09 am	11:23 am - 2:53 pm		
Wed 2	50	6:56 pm	Midnight - 3:23 am	9:05 am	12:12 pm - 3:48 pm		
Thu 3	40	7:52 pm	12:40 am - 4:16 am	9:58 am	1:05 pm - 4:41 pm	HIGH	
Fri 4	36	8:53 pm	1:35 am - 5:07 am	10:46 am	2:00 pm - 5:32 pm		
Sat 5	36	9:56 pm	2:31 am - 5:57 am	11:29 am	2:56 pm - 6:22 pm		
Sun 6	40	11:02 pm	3:30 am - 6:42 am	12:07 pm	3:55 pm - 7:07 pm		
Mon 7	48		4:28 am - 7:24 am	12:42 pm	4:53 pm - 7:49 pm	HALF	
Tue 8	36	12:07 am	5:25 am - 8:05 am	1:14 pm	5:50 pm - 8:30 pm		
Wed 9	29	1:14 am	6:25 am - 8:43 am	1:46 pm	6:50 pm - 9:08 pm		
Thu 10	26	2:22 am	7:26 am - 9:22 am	2:18 pm	7:51 pm - 9:47 pm		
Fri 11	34	3:32 am	8:29 am - 10:05 am	2:53 pm	8:54 pm - 10:30 pm		
Sat 12	42	4:44 am	9:33 am - 10:51 am	3:32 pm	9:58 pm - 11:16 pm	Perigee	
Sun 13	49	5:58 am	10:39 am - 11:41 am	4:18 pm	11:04 pm - Midnight		
Mon 14	51	7:10 am	11:46 am - 12:38 pm	5:10 pm	Midnight - 12:06 am	NEW	
Tue 15	40	8:18 am	12:50 pm - 1:38 pm	6:09 pm	12:11 am - 12:47 pm	LOW	
Wed 16	29	9:18 am	1:49 pm - 2:41 pm	7:13 pm	1:15 am - 2:03 am		
Thu 17	19	10:09 am	2:43 pm - 3:41 pm	8:19 pm	2:14 am - 3:06 am		
Fri 18	15	10:51 am	3:31 pm - 4:39 pm	9:23 pm	3:08 am - 4:06 am		
Sat 19	16	11:27 am	4:10 pm - 5:36 pm	10:25 pm	3:56 am - 5:04 am		
Sun 20	23	11:58 am	4:46 pm - 6:28 pm	11:23 pm	4:35 am - 6:01 am		
Mon 21	34	12:26 pm	5:20 pm - 7:18 pm		5:11 am - 6:53 am	HALF & WINTER	
Tue 22	26	12:52 pm	5:52 pm - 8:08 pm	12:20 am	5:45 am - 7:43 am		
Wed 23	22	1:18 pm	6:24 pm - 8:56 pm	1:16 am	6:17 am - 8:33 am		
Thu 24	24	1:44 pm	6:56 pm - 9:46 pm	2:11 am	6:49 am - 9:21 am	Apogee	
Fri 25	26	2:12 pm	7:31 pm - 10:37 pm	3:07 am	7:21 am - 10:11 am		
Sat 26	37	2:44 pm	8:11 pm - 11:27 pm	4:03 am	7:56 am - 11:02 am		
Sun 27	50	3:20 pm	8:52 pm - 12:22 am	5:01 am	8:36 am - 11:52 am		
Mon 28	63	4:02 pm	9:40 pm - 1:16 am	6:00 am	9:17 am - 12:47 pm		
Tue 29	69	4:50 pm	10:33 pm - 2:09 am	6:58 am	10:05 am - 1:41 pm	FULL	
Wed 30	60	5:45 pm	11:28 pm - Midnight	7:53 am	10:58 am - 2:34 pm	HIGH	
Thu 31	51	6:45 pm	Midnight - 3:04 am	8:43 am	11:53 am - 3:29 pm		

25 50 75 AVERAGE

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

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

For more, visit primetimes2.com



Bundled up against the cold, Joel Richardson shows off a chunky Kerr Lake largemouth.

Sportsman FISHING HOTSPOTS

KERR LAKE'S BASS ARE ON THE ROCKS

Tony Garitta

Crankbaits fool plenty of fish when the water temperatures turn towards cold

Grab your rod and reel, tie on a crankbait, add rocks tempered with chilly weather, and you have the perfect components for an exciting day of bass fishing at Kerr Lake, aka Buggs Island, on the North Carolina-Virginia border.

"December is the best month of the year for catching bass from rocks at Buggs Island," said guide Joel Richardson of Kernersville. "Buggs is a great winter lake for catching bass."

Unlike most winter bass havens, Kerr does not have any hot holes where warm-water discharges influence water temperatures. The key to catching bass involves targeting abundant rock formations that can be found from mid-lake to Clarksville, Va., according to Richardson (www.facebook.com/joelgrichardson).

"Some bass are taken from stumps about midway back in the creeks, but the majority of winter bass are caught from rocks with shallow- to deep-running crankbaits

and lipless crankbaits," said Richardson, a crankbait fanatic. "The fish can be taken from rocks in water 2 to 14 feet deep."

Oddly enough, Richardson does not stress looking for bass in conjunction with baitfish along rocky structure.

"Crawfish lingering at the rocks are more important than baitfish," Richardson said. "When largemouth are feeding on forage, the tendency is to catch smaller bass and more striped bass. The bigger largemouth feed upon the crawfish and are usually taken from the main lake."

For that reason, Richardson carries an ample supply of crankbaits in crawfish colors and some in shad patterns. If the water is stained, he includes crankbaits in chartreuse. He also adds jigs to his arsenal but maintains that crankbaits are better for winter bass.

Richardson does most of his cranking with 6½- to 7-foot, medium-action Shimano rods and matching reels spooled

with 10-pound monofilament.

"I use a slow-retrieve reel with a 5.3:1 gear ratio for less-aggressive, cold-water bass," he said.

Typically, Kerr Lake experiences a winter drawdown of 4 to 6 feet, exposing numerous rock formations, much to the benefit of fishermen. There's little joy idling along its 850 miles of shoreline in search of rocks in the bitter cold.

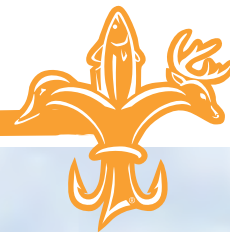
This year, finding rocks visually might be more challenging if the lake remains high.

"As long as the lake doesn't flood, the bass fishing should be good," said Richardson, who said winter catches usually consist of bass running from 2 to 4 pounds with the chance for quality fish up to 6 pounds.

Productive fishing occurs with the water temperatures in the mid-50s.

Bundle up in December, but don't let the cold discourage you. Richardson has had some of his best catches in the snow. ■

— Tony Garitta



DECEMBER'S BASS great on Santee River, Rediversion Canal

The Rediversion Canal and the Santee River offer some outstanding South Carolina bass fishing in December. Guide Joe Dennis of J. Hook Charters said water levels are typically stable throughout the month, and that leads to a great bite.

"The topwater bite is really good, even this late in the year, on both the Rediversion Canal and the Santee River. And soft-plastic worms — either fished wacky style or Texas-rigged — are also good choices," said Dennis (843-245-3762).

Limestone rocks line some of the banks of the Rediversion Canal and the Santee River. Dennis said fish love hanging out along those banks, especially where bigger rocks or downed timber and other debris have gathered.

The December water is usually very clear, so he suggests downsizing your lures and line and using fluorocarbon leaders when fishing with plastic worms. When Texas-rigging, anglers should use the lightest weight they can get away with. For topwater lures, Dennis ties braid directly to the lure.

"You want to make long casts this month, because the water is so clear," he said. "Long casts and using light line and smaller lures is the key. It's a numbers game this month. You'll catch a lot of bass, and they'll range anywhere from a pound up to 6 pounds. You'll catch a lot of 2- and 3-pounders this time of year, but hooking a bigger one is always a possibility."

For topwater lures, Dennis uses a small, clear Tiny Torpedo and casts it close to the banks and around any type of structure.

"I give it three twitches and pause, three twitches and pause," he said. "For wacky worms, I hook the worm in the middle, make a cast, then slowly work it back to the boat, pausing frequently to let the worm dangle and sink."

Another thing that makes fishing here so much fun is that anglers frequently catch stripers along with the largemouth.

"There's a lot of stripers in this part of the canal and the river, especially from the (US) 52 bridge all the way to Jamestown, so you never know which one you're going to catch," he said.

Dennis said the most important thing about fishing this time of year is to watch the water levels on Santee Cooper's website.

"If they're pulling a lot of water because of heavy rains, that's when you do not want to go. You want the levels to

Guide Joe Dennis catches plenty of nice bass this month in the Rediversion Canal and Santee River.



Joe Dennis

read normal or average for at least a couple days leading up to your trip. The more stable the water, the better the fishing will be," he said. ■

— Brian Cope



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TRENT, NEUSE RIVERS are striper, speck havens in December

By December, most of North Carolina's inshore gamefish have gone through inlets to the warmer Atlantic Ocean. However, that situation doesn't apply in the Neuse and Trent rivers, which make their way to the Pamlico Sound.

"We have a year-round population of stripers and (speckled) trout in the rivers because of baitfish, mainly menhaden," said D. Ashley King, owner of New Bern's Keep Casting Charters guide service. "Rockfish (aka stripers) and trout live from New Bern up the Neuse to Pitchkettle (Creek) and in the Trent."

King (910-389-4118) has two main tactics — depending on the wind — to find both species.

"If we have a high wind and lots of current, I'll troll until I find stripers with a side-scanner depth finder or I catch fish," King said. "If it's calm, I troll and scan until I see fish, then I cast to 'em."

King trolls or casts similar lures — 4-inch Z-Man Diesel MinnowZs, MirrOlure Little Johns or Little John XLs soft-plastic grubs threaded on 1/8- or 1/4-ounce jigheads. If he finds a school of stripers, he stops, casts at ledges and bumps lures to the bottom. He doesn't target specks, which are bonus fish that attack the same lures.

Typical Neuse or Trent ledges range from 3 to 6 feet deep down to 20 feet. Stripers and trout orient on those ledges. King's favorite lures include chartreuse or golden-bream 3 3/4-inch Little Johns



Guide Ashley King catches plenty of striped bass like this one in the Trent and Neuse rivers every winter.

Ashley King

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If we have a high wind and lots of current, I'll troll until I find stripers with a side-scanner depth finder or I catch fish. If it's calm, I troll and scan until I see fish, then I cast to 'em



or 4 1/4-inch XL Little John grubs.

"They're fat, ugly lures that resemble a straightened-out tad pole," King said. "People either love or hate 'em. But with braid, I can cast one like a bullet, 60 to 70 feet.

"I cast baits to (ledges), then bounce 'em off structure," King said. "You don't drag 'em or you'll get hung, so I take plenty of lures."

His tackle includes 7-foot, medium-light rods spooled with 10-pound braid and 15-pound fluorocarbon leaders.

Winter stripers range from 20 to 24 inches long, while trout may vary from 18 to 22 inches. Some bigger fish are caught

"Since the (striper) moratorium, people have caught 26- to 30-inch rockfish," King said. ■

— Craig Holt

Shallow-water grouper like this gag make a move closer to the shoreline in December as the water cools, putting the rocks around Frying Pan Shoals into play.



FRYING PAN SHOALS fills up with grouper through December

Southeastern North Carolina rarely gets nasty, cold weather in December, and when it happens, the cold runs out in a few days and the weather is nice again. There also seems to be a break from fall's occasionally gusty northeast winds, and this allows fishermen to go offshore. Some of the best places to head are the rocks and shipwrecks along Frying Pan Shoals, which often provide world-class bottom-fishing.

The cooling water fires up bottomfish, and they bite exceptionally well. A huge variety of bottomfish live in this area, with shallow-water grouper topping the list in the last month before the season closes down to protect the spawn.

Ryan Jordan of Fugitive Charters in Southport, N.C., has clients that book annually for December; he has developed several ways of making sure they return home with limits of grouper.

"During this late fall, gag grouper move shallower and feed more aggressively," said Jordan (910-933-4242). "Most other times of the year, we're running to 100 feet-plus to catch them, but they move up into 60 to 80 feet of water when the water first cools in the fall. They're also feeding more aggressively, and that makes them easy to catch."

Jordan uses a rig that begins with a large, 3-way swivel, with the line from the rod and reel tied to one eye, an 8- to 12-ounce sinker on a short leader from the second eye and 10 feet of

130-pound mono tied to the third eye with a 7/0 Eagle Claw Circle Sea circle hook on the business end.

"We primarily use live pinfish and live pogies for grouper baits," Jordan said. "When we use cut bait or dead cigar minnows, we catch a lot of red snapper. They have to be released, so we try not to catch them. Occasionally, they get so thick we have to move."

Fishermen should always check the snapper and grouper regulations before heading offshore. Many species in the snapper-grouper complex have size and creel limits, and several species tend to close in the late fall as their annual allocations are caught. All shallow-water grouper seasons close from Jan. 1 to April 30, and red grouper season is closed through May 31.

In addition to black, gag, red and scamp grouper, the December offshore bottom catch may include vermilion snapper, triggerfish, black sea bass, porgies, grunts, hog snapper, African pompano and more. This is a great way to fill a freezer with tasty fish to eat all winter. ■

— Jerry Dilsaver



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HUNTING SEASONS

DEER

Region	Method	Season Dates
Western	Bowhunting	Sept. 12-27 Oct. 11-Nov. 22 Dec. 12-Jan. 1, 2021 (bucks only)
	Muzzleloader	Sept. 28-Oct. 10
	Gun	Nov. 23-Dec. 12
Northwestern	Bowhunting	Sept. 12-Nov. 6
	Muzzleloader	Nov. 7-20
	Gun	Nov. 21-Jan. 1, 2021
Central	Bowhunting	Sept. 12-Oct. 30
	Muzzleloader	Oct. 31-Nov. 13
	Gun	Nov. 14-Jan. 1, 2021
Northeastern/ Southeastern	Bowhunting	Sept. 12-Oct. 2
	Muzzleloader	Oct. 3-16
	Gun	Oct. 17-Jan. 1, 2021

BEAR

Oct. 12-Nov. 21 & Dec. 14-Jan. 1, 2021:	In and west of Surry, Wilkes, Caldwell, Burke and Cleveland counties
Nov. 14-Jan. 1, 2021:	Alamance, Anson, Cabarrus, Caswell, Chatham, Davidson, Durham, Granville, Guilford, Lee, Mecklenburg, Montgomery, Orange, Person, Randolph, Rockingham, Rowan, Stanly, Union counties
Oct. 17-Jan. 1, 2021:	Franklin, Harnett, Hoke, Johnston, Moore, Richmond, Scotland, Vance, Warren, Wake counties
Nov. 21-Jan. 1, 2021:	Alexander, Catawba, Davie, Forsyth, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Stokes, Yadkin counties
Nov. 11-Jan. 1, 2021:	Bladen, Brunswick, Carteret, Columbus, Cumberland, Duplin, New Hanover, Onslow, Pamlico, Pender, Robeson, Sampson counties
Nov. 14-29, Dec. 12-27:	Dare, Hyde, Tyrrell counties
Nov. 14-22, Dec. 12-27:	Beaufort, Bertie, Craven, Hertford, Jones, Martin, Washington counties
Nov. 14-22, Dec. 12-27:	Camden*, Chowan*, Gates, Pasquotank*, Perquimans (*Seasons open Nov. 13 by local laws)
Nov. 21-Dec. 20:	Edgecombe, Greene, Halifax, Lenoir, Nash, Northampton, Pitt, Wayne, Wilson counties

SQUIRREL

Oct. 124-Feb. 28, 2021 (gray & red)
Oct. 11-Jan. 31, 2021 (fox)

RABBIT

Oct. 12-Feb. 28, 2021

RACCOON, OPOSSUM

Oct. 12-Feb. 28, 2021

QUAIL

Nov. 21-Feb. 28, 2021

GROUSE

Oct. 12-Feb. 28, 2021

RAILS

Sept. 1-Nov. 20

(KING, SORA, VIRGINIA, CLAPPER)
(GALLINULES, MOORHENS)

CANADA GEESE

Resident zone, Oct. 7-17, Nov. 7-28,
Dec. 19-Feb. 13, 2021
Statewide: Sept. 1-30; NE Zone, Jan. 15-30, permit only

SNOW, BLUE, ROSS GEESE

Oct. 13-Feb. 13, 2021, Feb. 15-March 31, 2021, permit

DUCKS

Oct. 7-10, Nov. 7-28, Dec. 19-Jan. 30, 2021

EARLY TEAL

Sept. 12-30 (east of US 17 only)

SEA DUCKS

Nov. 23-Jan. 30, 2021

BRANT

Dec. 19-Jan. 30, 2021

DOVE

Sept. 5-Oct. 10, Nov. 14-28, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2021

TUNDRA SWAN

Nov. 7-Jan. 30, 2021. Bag limit 1, by permit only.

WOODCOCK

Dec. 10-Jan. 30, 2021

WILD TURKEY (Youth)

April 3-9, 2021
April 10-May 8, 2021

HUNTING SEASONS

SPECIES	SEASON DATES (PRIVATE LAND)	BAG LIMIT	POSSESSION LIMIT
Doves	Sept. 5-7, Sept. 8-Oct. 11 Nov. 14-28, Dec. 25-Jan. 31, 2021	15	45
Crow	Nov. 1-March 1, 2021	No limits	
Quail	Nov. 23-March 1, 2021	12	36
Rabbit	Nov. 26-March 1, 2021	5	15
Squirrel	Oct. 1-March 1, 2021	10	30
Fox	Nov. 26-March 1, 2021	No limits	
Grouse	Nov. 26-March 1, 2021 (Game Zone 1 only)	3	9
Raccoon	Sept. 15-March 15, 2021 (statewide)	3 raccoons per party	
Opossum	Sept. 15-March 15, 2021	No limits	
Other furbearers	Nov. 26-March 1, 2020 (bobcat, otter, weasel, mink, muskrat, skunk)	No limits	
Bear	Game Zone 1 Game Zone 2 Game Zone 2 (Georgetown, Horry, Marion and Williamsburg counties)	Oct. 17-23 (still hunting only) Oct. 24-30 (dogs) Oct. 17-30 (still hunting only) Oct. 17-30 (still hunting only)	
Rails	Sept. 15-20,		
King & Clapper	Oct. 1-Dec. 3	15	45
Sora & Virginia		25	75
Gallinules (common/purple)		15	45
Snipe	Nov. 14 - Feb. 28, 2021	8	24
Woodcock	Dec. 18 - Jan. 31, 2021	3	9
Wild Turkey	March 22-April 30, 2021 (Game Zones 3&4) April 1-May 10, 2021 (Game Zones 1&2)	3	

DEER SEASON

ZONE	ARCHERY ONLY	PRIM WEAPON	GUNS
1		Oct. 1-10	Oct. 11-Jan. 1, 2021
2	Sept. 15-30	Oct. 1-10	Oct. 11-Jan. 1, 2021
3			Aug. 15-Jan. 1, 2021
4	Aug 15-31		Sept. 1-Jan. 1, 2021
Youth Days: Game Zone 1, Sept. 26, Jan. 2; Game Zone 2: Sept. 12, Jan. 2; Game Zone 3: Aug. 8, Jan. 2; Game Zone 4: Aug. 8, Jan. 2.			

WATERFOWL SEASONS

SPECIES	DATES	BAG LIMIT
Duck	Teal only: Sept. 11-26 Nov. 21-28, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2021	6 6
Canada geese	Sept. 1-30, Nov. 21-28, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2021, Feb. 14-March 1, 2021	15 (Sept.) 5 (Others)
Blue/snow (light) geese	Nov. 21-28, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2021, Feb. 14-March 1, 2021	25
Brant	Dec. 13-Jan. 2-31, 2021	2
Sea ducks	Nov. 21-28, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2021	6
Mergansers	Nov. 21-28, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2021	5 (1 hooded)
Coots	Nov. 21-28, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2021	15

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Millennium Outdoors, a Mississippi-based company, has added a couple of hunting chairs — the G100 and G200 — to its top-drawer line of hunting stands and accessories.

The shooting chairs have adjustable tripod legs, a folding design and a full-back seat. Both can be adjusted in height to give hunters the perfect view out the

window of a box blind or a from a pit blind in the marsh. Seats are 17x20 inches on both stands and feature 360° swivel capability. Weight capacity is 400 pounds.

Both stands are pre-drilled to hold an optional shooting stick for a more-stable shooting platform when long-range accuracy is needed or an optional bow-holder. **MSRP is \$159 for the G100 and \$209 for the G200.**

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alter the sound of the calls from high to low to mimic multiple ducks. It will also produce a very good widgeon whistle and a passable call for teal, he said.

Big Lake partners with Maurilio, a Brazilian company, to produce the calls in Jatobé and Rosewood models.

"You get a very soft, mellow sound," McLaurin said.

MSRP: \$40 (Jatobé), \$50 (Rosewood).

For more info, visit: www.biglakeoutdoor-products.com.



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For more info, visit www.gloomis.com





Hunting/Fishing SCRAPBOOK



Isaac Wallace

Isaac Wallace, a second-grader from Mocksville, N.C., killed this nice 8-point buck on Sept. 26 in Davie Co.



Wells Boeschen

Wells Boeschen caught this 3-pound flounder on a live minnow in the Wando River near Mt. Pleasant, S.C., on Sept. 12.



Jerry Firth

Jerry Firth of Ocean Isle Beach N.C., caught this 27-inch, 5.42-pound speckled trout in the ICW on a live finger mullet.



Dallas Brooks

Dallas Brooks for Siler City, N.C., caught this 18-inch speck on a finger mullet on July 24 near Carolina Beach Inlet.



Chris Gooch

Chris Gooch caught and released this citation-sized flounder near Bald Head Island, N.C. on July 3.



Joseph Joyner

Joseph Joyner, 12, of Sanford, N.C., caught this nice rainbow trout on June 20 near Banner Elk, N.C. It was his biggest ever.

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Allen Hodge

Allen Hodge, 10, aka "Little Man," killed this buck in full velvet on Oct. 10, near Turbeville, S.C.



Eli Hylton

Eli Hylton, 8, tagged his first deer on Nov. 30, 2019, in Randolph Co., N.C.



Chuck Stewart

Chuck Stewart of Stem, N.C., shows off a nice white bass caught in the Flat River near Durham, N.C.



Emma James

Emma James, 10, with her first buck, taken in Stokes Co., N.C., on Youth Day 2019.



Justin Kelly

Justin Kelly killed this 9-point, 190-poun buck on Nov. 17, 2019, in Rockingham Co., N.C., with 00 buckshot.



Nina Ford

Nina Ford caught her first big redfish in the surf at Folly Beach, S.C., on Sept. 11. The fish hit a piece of cut mullet.



Gabriel Fillingame

Gabriel Fillingame, 3, caught his first bass in a private pond in Craven Co., N.C.



Conner Taylor

Conner Taylor, 9, killed this great gobbler in Bertie Co., N.C., on April 6. It had a 10½-inch beard and 1⅞-inch spurs.

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