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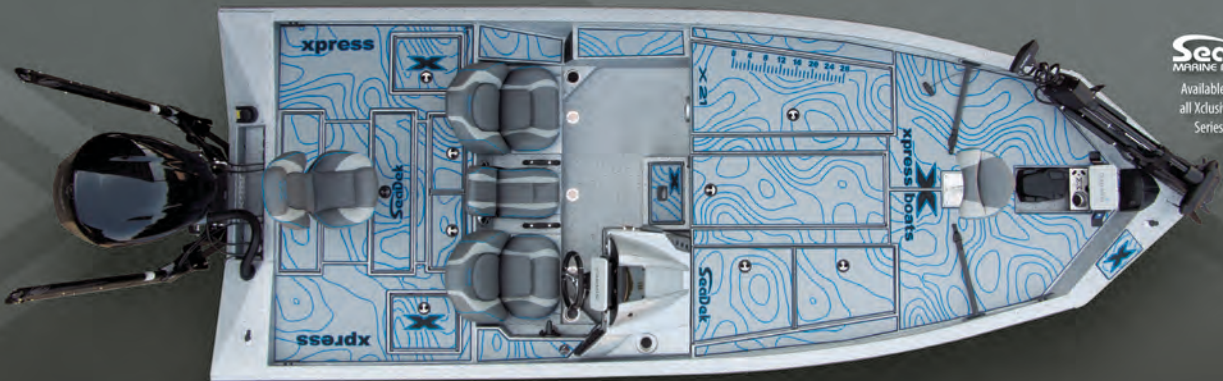


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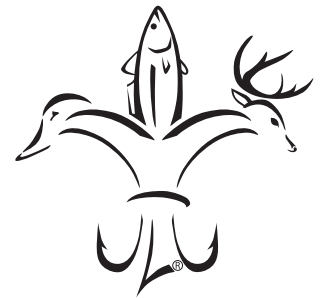
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Carolina
SPORTSMAN

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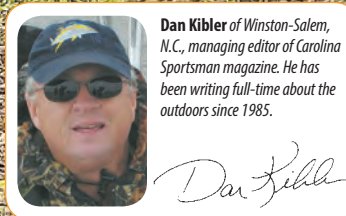


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OUTDOOR UPDATE

with Dan Kibler

One of the author's trail cameras snapped this photo of a huge hawk dropping in for a visit to a rotten stump on his hunting lease in September.



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

WORK IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR RETIREMENT IS NO. 1 WITH A BULLET; IT'S BEEN A GREAT 36-YEAR JOURNEY

I have big plans for the next couple of years, God willing and creeks don't rise. I have repeatedly told my wife that when I'm done fishing two days a week (or hunting two days, in season) and playing golf one day a week, she will have my undivided attention. On those other three days — the sabbath being a day

of rest — she will have me underfoot for various honey-do list items, not restricted to throwing out junk in the basement, mowing grass, raking leaves, trimming tree limbs, playing

approached me with the idea of writing an outdoors column for the Sunday paper. Why? It was common knowledge I took a week of vacation every November to go to the Virginia mountains to deer hunt, and a week of vacation in July to go to North Carolina's Outer Banks to fish.

I guess that's how you become an outdoor writer.

Doster told me it mattered less how good a hunter or fisherman I was than discovering people who were good and telling their stories. He also predicted I'd be writing for *Outdoor Life* in 5 years. It took 4 years.

Anyway, that gig ended in 2006, after almost 22 years, when a couple of pinheads in charge of the paper figured they didn't need anybody writing the hunting and fishing column anymore. I found out on my 50th birthday, a couple of hours after I'd killed a nice 8-point buck. Talk about instant highs and lows.

After a few months, I was rescued by Todd Masson, longtime editor of *Louisiana Sportsman*. He had a new South Carolina magazine that needed an editor. Would I do it? It took a New York second to say yes. A few years later, I added the North Carolina magazine to my portfolio, and a few years after that, the two were combined into what is now *Carolina Sportsman*.

Along the way, I've made friends of some of the best writers, fishermen and hunters around, and I have loved most every minute of it. One of those guys, Brian Cope, will replace me as editor beginning in the January magazine. I will get to enjoy the magazine when it arrives in the mail, instead of every day of the month. I hope you will continue to enjoy it. It's been great.

See you in the duck blind, the deer stand, the turkey woods, and on the deck of a fishing boat. ■



The Carter brothers of Snow Camp, N.C., scored on these 8-pointers. Easton, took his 120-inch buck on Sept. 11, and Landon took his 131-inch buck on Sept. 25. For a look at some of the best bucks taken in the Carolinas, see the Big Buck Gallery.

of rest — she will have me underfoot for various honey-do list items, not restricted to throwing out junk in the basement, mowing grass, raking leaves, trimming tree limbs, playing with the grandson, taking out the trash, painting, etc.

By the time you read this, I will have joined the ranks of the retired, as in, 36 years of outdoor writing in the rear-view mirror and a bucket list of things to do.

The journey to this laptop started in 1985, when the afternoon newspaper I was working for in Winston-Salem, N.C., covering high school sports, minor-league hockey, golf and Wake Forest sports, was deemed no longer profitable by some bean-counters in Richmond.

Part of the staff was absorbed by its sister morning paper. Since I had been in charge of the afternoon paper's sports department, I guess the powers that be figured they needed to keep me around. Two old-school newspaper guys, Joe Doster and Joe Goodman,

CONSOLATION PRIZE EARNS BOWHUNTER WIN IN OCTOBER BAG-A-BUCK CONTEST

James Farris of Eden, N.C., still wonders about the one that got away, but he's sure proud of the 8-point buck he killed in Rockingham County on Oct. 7.

Farris had been watching the 8-pointer, which he estimates will score between 115 and 120, with a 16-inch spread, along with a couple of other bucks on the farm he was hunting — one of them much bigger.

The afternoon of Oct. 7, he got in the woods during a light rain and was there when the rain stopped and three bucks walked out to his corn pile. The biggest buck never got closer than 70 yards, but the second 8-pointer gave Farris a 35-yard shot with his brand-new Mission Crossbow.

He didn't miss. The buck carried the Muzzy hybrid mechanical broadhead only 60 yards before collapsing.

Two days later, Farris entered his buck in *Carolina Sportsman's* Bag-A-Buck contest, and on Nov. 1, his buck was drawn as the winner of October's monthly contest.

Farris's prizes include a 1-year subscription to *Carolina Sportsman* and a Sportsman prize package that includes a True knife and other goodies. Along with every subscriber who enters the



contest, Farris will be eligible for the grand prize: a 3-year subscription to *Carolina Sportsman*, a 2-day deer/hog combo hunt for two people at South Carolina's Cherokee Run Hunting Lodge, and a Sportsman prize package that includes a Millennium M25 Hang-On tree stand and other goodies.

"I had seen this buck and a couple of others and was hunting them pretty hard," said Farris, who had just finished a series of treatments for bladder



James Farris of Eden, N.C., arrowed this nice 8-point buck on Oct. 7 and won the October Bag-A-Buck contest.

cancer at Duke University Hospital before deer season opened. "I have always hunted with a Mathews (compound) bow, but with my sickness, with the chemo and weakness, I had to get a



GATOR GIRL SCORES ON PEE DEE MONSTER

Kristy Hincer of Loris, S.C., killed a huge alligator on Oct. 9, the last day of South Carolina's month-long alligator season. The beast measured 12-foot-9.

"I was hunting in Zone 4 — the Pee Dee Region. This is the third gator I've killed in my life, but this one was by far the biggest," she said.

crossbow. I wasn't going to stop hunting. I had just bought it and sighted it in.

"I was in my stand when it quit raining, and they came out."

Farris, a taxidermist, said the bucks came into view around 6:30. He'd seen them on trail cameras and in person before, but this was the first shot opportunity. The biggest buck, which he estimated at 135 inches, never got close enough for a shot, but the second 8-pointer turned broadside, well within range, and he scored at around 6:40. ■



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NC LOWERS LIFETIME LICENSE COSTS FOR 2 POPULAR LICENSES

Officials from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission have announced that recent legislation now allows for North Carolina residents 50 to 69 years old to purchase a Lifetime Sportsman and Lifetime Unified Sportsman license for \$265 and \$358, respectively.

These prices are half of what the same resident lifetime licenses cost before the change.

"We are constantly identifying ways for North Carolinians to take advantage of our state's wonderful fishing and hunting opportunities," said Cam Ingram, the Commission's executive director. "After careful review, we determined offering a segment our lifetime licenses at a more affordable rate was an option we could pursue.

"We are grateful to be able to offer the new rates and hope eligible resident anglers and hunters will support wildlife conservation by taking advantage of the new pricing."

A Lifetime Sportsman license allows for statewide hunting and inland fishing for residents. It includes privileges for hunting for big game, hunting on game lands, hunting for waterfowl, fishing in public mountain trout waters, fishing in trout waters on game lands and fishing in joint waters. It does not include the bear management e-stamp, non-resident bear license, federal duck stamp or fishing in coastal waters.

A Lifetime Unified Sportsman license allows for the same as above, but also includes fishing in coastal waters.

Eligible individuals may purchase these licenses online at ncwildlife.org, at a local wildlife service agent or by calling 888-248-6834. ■

Bag-A-Buck Contest

is underway



Don't forget to post photos of your bucks in the Carolina Sportsman Bag-A-Buck Contest.

To enter or see deer that have been entered, log onto <https://www.carolinasportsman.com/bag-a-buck>. Your entry could bring home a nice Sportsman prize package for monthly prizes or the grand prize.

Brayden McMullan, 12, won the Fall Brawl king mackerel tournament out of his family's Ocean Isle Fishing Center with a 52-pounder.

FALL BRAWL WIN GOES TO 12-YEAR-OLD FISHERMAN

K By Chris Burrows
 ing mackerel tournaments at the Ocean Isle Fishing Center are a family affair. Rube, the patriarch of the McMullan family, serves as the weighmaster, while sons Brant and Barrett, along with their wives Amy and Stephanie, help organize and provide logistical support while also competing.

On Oct. 23, the next generation of McMullan fishing talent showed up and made his presence known, winning the tournament with a 52-pound fish and cashing a check for better than \$35,000.

Brayden McMullan, 12, who usually fishes with his parents, begged them for a month to let him enter his 18-foot Penncraft, the *King Slinga*, in the event; the winning fish is generally caught right off the beach. Amy and Brant McMullan discussed whether Brayden, who can handle a small boat as well as most adults, should enter. They finally said yes, as long as a responsible adult was on board in case anything went wrong. One of Brant McMullan's friends agreed to ride along. His parents sponsored Brayden McMullan's entry; he used his own money to enter a single calcutta of his choice: the Small Boat calcutta.

Unfortunately, the man scheduled to be on board as a "supervisory mate" had to back out at the last minute. But Scott Schmitt, who was manning the Yamaha trailer, stepped in.

Brant McMullan gave his final approval the morning of the tournament after checking the sea conditions; his son ran two miles off the beach and started trolling. He caught two small fish over the next few hours, and at his last stop, right after putting his baits out, he noticed his double-menhaden rig getting nervous. As the baits tried to swim past the boat, he caught the silhouette of a king mackerel for just a second.

The big mackerel turned through the spread, hit a bluefish bait, then peeled off. The first run was almost 450 yards, exposing the spool bar on his Shimano Torium 30. Schmitt took the helm as Brayden McMullan battled the fish, which made a shorter run, then circled the boat. Once he saw what he was dealing with, he called for the gaff. Schmitt grabbed it and sunk it home from the bow.



At the scales, the fish weighed 52 pounds, putting Brayden McMullan in the lead. The fish held up, giving him the Fall Brawl championship with the second-largest fish in the 20-year history of the event.

The young angler's first-prize money was \$35,753. ■

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SPORTSMAN'S BIG BUCK GALLERY

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

ON THE COVER



Christopher Thomas of Georgetown, S.C., tagged this 13-point buck on Oct. 17 in Georgetown County.



Carolyn Shipman's 12-point buck from Sumter County, S.C., weighed 211 pounds and scored 137%.



Jamie Moore of Stokesdale, N.C., took this 12-point, Person County buck on Sept. 21. It scored 140%.



Lee Leisure of Walnut Cove, N.C., killed this non-typical 12-point buck on Sept. 28 in Stokes County. It scored 147.



Claire Coble of Mt. Gilead, N.C., killed this 13-point Richmond County buck on Sept. 25, Youth Day in North Carolina. The buck scored 162%.



James Scheer of Reidsville, N.C., dropped this 143-inch, 8-point buck in Caswell County on Sept. 25.



Anderson Long, 14, killed this 11-point, 140-inch buck in Person County, N.C.



Jason Dunn killed this 13-point, 147-inch buck on Oct. 24 near Snow Camp, N.C.



Michael Hutto of Barnwell, S.C., took this 10-point, 156-inch buck on Oct. 18 in Barnwell County.



Dylan Dickey dropped this 9-point trophy buck in full velvet on Aug. 16 in Barnwell County, S.C.



Laathan Peterson of Taylorsville, N.C., tagged this 19-point, 161-inch Caswell County buck on Oct. 26.



THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

■ By Terry Madewell

TRY THESE SEVEN TIPS FOR LATE-SEASON DEER HUNTING AND USE A FEW TAGS AS THE END APPROACHES.

Many hunters put deer hunting in the rear-view mirror after Thanksgiving, because deer patterns change dramatically and hunting can get tough. Tagging late-season deer is realistic, but it requires hunters to adapt to changes in deer behavior.

These seven considerations for late-season deer hunting can vastly improve your odds of success.

Michael Bibb

FOOD IS AGAIN HIGH PRIORITY

With the rut ending in most areas of the Carolinas, food is again a high priority for deer, but natural food is becoming scarce in December.

Darryl Madden, a 61-year-old deer hunter from Leland, N.C., said hunters can perform some “self-help” by giving deer fresh greenery.

“The late-season pattern of diminishing natural food creates a scenario where hunters can gain an edge by creating attractive food sources with food plots,” he said. “Deer need to eat to withstand cold weather.”

Madden, a longtime member of the Bass Pro Shops and Mossy Oak pro staffs, said cold-weather food-plot crops are different from summer and fall plots, so pick the crops best suited for your area.

“Wheat and rye are good choices for most areas, but other food sources can be highly effective depending on the soil, moisture and location,” he said. “Another plant I’ve seen work well in many areas is turnips.”

“Location is a key element to successful late-season food plots,” Madden said. “One tactic is to plant small food plots in now-depleted agriculture fields that deer used for food earlier in the season.”

“I want my food plot to be the best option for deer, so it needs to be close to where deer live,” he said. “Deer travel long distances during the rut, but during the late season, movement is restricted to a core home area. A food plot with succulent green offerings in their core area is a deer magnet.”

Mike Johnson, manager of the Clinton House near Clinton, S.C., 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 deer attractor,” said Johnson (864-316-1371). “And corn/bait stations are a high priority for late-season.”

I.D. POST-RUT TRAVEL ROUTES

Madden said identifying travel routes for late-season hunting creates opportunities to see more deer.

“Late season typically means the best hunting will be during low-light time periods,” he said. “The truth is, the window of time to see deer, especially big bucks, is short if you wait on them to come to openings or food sources. With the use of trail cameras and boot-time scouting, hunters can identify travel routes from bedding to feeding areas. Setting up on that travel route improves the odds for a shot, with ample available light, and it is applicable for bow and gun hunters.”

December deer are typically wary because of heavy pressure, and Madden said travel routes typically utilize heavy cover, so they are not always the shortest distances from beds to the food source.

PLACING LATE-SEASON STANDS >

Terry Madewell



Any available strip of open land can turn into a great, late-season food plot that will have deer coming on a regular basis for the productive greenery.

PLACING LATE-SEASON STANDS

Steve Cobb, an elite hunter from Union, S.C., will use trail cameras, scouting and seat time in stands to pinpoint cold-weather core areas.

“Once I have that area determined, I focus on the best places to hunt with minimal human intrusion,” he said. “Identifying and supplementing food sources and patterning the travel routes helps me locate stands to take advantage of their travel and eating options.”

Cobb, a member of the Hunter Specialties pro staff, said generic considerations for stand placement can include setting up to overlook a southern slope of a cutover; that can be productive on cold, sunny mornings.

“Locate stands to provide the best view of as much of the core area as possible, with the least physical intrusion,” he said. “Deer are wary in late season, so minimize human disturbance.”

HIDE YOUR STANDS

Cobb said late-season deer need to feel protected with cover, yet still have food sources nearby. The stand type and location must be subtle.

“Climbers are ideal if you have the appropriate trees,” he said. “If you use ground blinds or lean-up stands, hide them well and cut small openings for shooting. Stealth is crucial, and major changes in habitat or placing a new stand in their core area in the wide open can cause deer to change patterns.”

The luxury of having leafy cover for backdrops and hiding deer stands is in the past, and hunters must cope with this dramatic change.

Terry Heirs at Blackwater Hunting Lodge in Ulmer, S.C., said another option is to increase the distance to the bait station or target area.

“We’ll use stands that haven’t been used that year and locate them further from the bait station,” he said. “Distance can be an equalizer, and if a gun hunter is comfortable at 130 to 150 yards, the odds of seeing deer improve compared to stands much closer that were quite appropriate when we had abundant natural cover.”

Heirs (803-671-4868) said this distance buffer, along with using available cover to hide a stand, mitigates small movements and provides additional protection regarding scent.

“I only hunt stands with the right wind, but you never know what direction a deer will approach and the distance improves odds of success,” he said.



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.

Do whatever you can to hide your deer stand as the end of the season approaches, covering it with camouflaged fabric or dressing it in natural cover. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Deer pro Darrell Madden said a buck’s route from late-season bedding to feeding areas may be much shorter.



PREVAILING WIND CONDITIONS

Weather patterns transition from late summer to early winter, and the prevailing wind direction is certainly one of these potential changes.

Willie McCutchen, an elite bowhunter from Kingtree, S.C., has monitored and recorded wind-direction patterns for years, and the overall pattern has changed where he hunts.

McCutchen researched wind-pattern records and compiled his own data that goes back several years.

“Not only does the wind change seasonally as a natural occurrence, but where I hunt, the overall tendencies of wind patterns have changed significantly in the past several years,” he said.

“Ten years ago, the prevailing wind direction was southeast 75% of the time, throughout the season,” he said “In recent years, the wind direction is now 50% northeast throughout the season. This dramatically impacts where I place stands or use climbers.

“Whatever the wind direction tendency is in a given area, hunters need to understand that pattern to properly structure their stand-placement process,” he said. “Monitor wind patterns, and regardless of the wind direction, use it to your advantage and adapt daily and seasonally as it changes.”

INGRESS AND EGRESS

Many of these factors, including barren hardwoods, ultra-wary deer and changing wind patterns, should influence how you get into and sneak out of your stand.

“Ingress and egress patterns are crucial to late-season success,” Trey Phillips said.

Phillips manages the Clarendon Club, a large hunting facility near Summerton, S.C. “It’s always important, but by late season, unless we shoot at a deer, I don’t want to leave a trace that we were ever in the stand.”

Phillips (803-478-2010) said when selecting late-season stands, ingress and egress routes based on prevailing winds and using natural cover to shield movements are essential.

“We typically park further away from the stand than earlier in the season and walk a longer approach route to ensure we don’t alert deer,” he said. “We approach via routes deer are least likely



to use and that have a favorable wind. The same is true when we leave; we literally sneak out.”

Phillips said proper ingress sets up the hunter for success, and the stealthy egress ensures the stand can be productive the next time the wind is right.

“We can help ourselves with a little planning strategy, and during late-season, we need to utilize every edge to be successful,” he said.

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Cobb said details usually dictate the level of success, including use of quality optics.

“Adaptation is essential in late-season hunting,” Cobb said. “During the rut, a lot of daytime movement occurs, but now the last few minutes of the evening are a precious hunting time.”

Early morning offers potential, too, he said, but that time is often short and movements less predictable, so most hunters prefer evenings.

“My recommendation is to use the best-quality optics you can afford to take advantage of those valuable last moments of light,” he said.

Cobb said hunters can potentially see a deer at any time of the day late in the season, but low-light periods have produced the vast majority of his sightings. But in low light, deer are often difficult to see without optics.

“Their coloration, combined with the type cover where they’re usually found, helps them blend with the cover in low light,” he said. “I get into the stand early, but those last few minutes of light are typically more productive than all of the hours prior to those



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last-light moments. Quality optics can extend productive hunting time by several minutes, significantly enhancing the opportunity to shoot a big buck.”

Perseverance is crucial at this time of the year, he said. “I hunt until the last second that I can clearly define the target,” he said. “Many bucks have been taken in those last few moments because I was constantly scanning with quality optics and was rewarded for this patience and perseverance.” ■

STICKS & STRINGS >

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STICKS AND STRINGS

Sammy Romano



Sammy Romano

A dry fire can be devastating to a bow setup.

DRY FIRES SET FIRE TO PLENTY OF BOWS

DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT PULLING BACK A BOW WITHOUT THE PROPER ARROW AND RELEASE

I am writing as I sit at work, waiting for a customer who is bringing in his bow for an emergency repair. It's 8 a.m., and he is leaving for an outfitted Missouri whitetail hunt at noon.

His bow was dry-fired by a "buddy" with whom he was practicing. Until he gets here, I'm not even sure if I have all of the parts I'll need to repair the bow. This will be the fourth or fifth dry-fired/derailed bow I have repaired just before someone's major hunting trip this week. It seems ignorance is winning the war over common sense, so this inspired me to write about some of these incidents in the hopes of saving someone else from being put in the horrible situation these guys are in.

Here are some of the more common causes of archery mishaps, and my advice for avoiding them. I give the same speech about dos and don'ts every time we sell a bow, and sadly, all of these are included under the DON'T column.

NO DRY FIRES, EVER

The first one is obvious, but I feel the need to reiterate it here anyway. **NEVER, EVER DRY-FIRE ANY BOW.** When you dry-fire a bow — shoot it without an arrow of proper weight securely and fully snapped onto the string — the energy that would have been transferred to the arrow has to go somewhere. That some-

where is rarely a good place, especially with today's high-speed bows. The excess energy is dissipated as vibration and noise, and it often does severe damage to the bow.

Damage from a dry fire may include broken string and cables, bent or broken cams or even broken limbs. In very rare cases, there is no obvious damage to the bow, but even then, it often causes the bow to become untuned.

Notice what I wrote about proper arrow weight and fully nocking the arrow. Most people consider a dry fire to be shooting the bow without an arrow at all, but if the arrow is too light or isn't fully attached to the string, the result can be the same.

In many cases, probably even 50% of the time, the person who dry-fires the bow isn't the bow's owner. It amazes me that someone will pick up another person's weapon without first asking, but I see this time and again. Often, while the archer is walking to the target to retrieve their arrows, a "buddy" who is watching him shoot picks up their bow and lets it rip without an arrow in it. The archer hears the sickening sound, and turns around to see the friend holding what is left of his or her bow with a

dumbfounded expression on his or her face. Never leave your bow unattended if you can help it. Also, explain to anyone attending a practice session not to touch your bow or dry-fire any bow.

BOOZE? NO BOW

Alcohol also plays into many of these dry-fire scenarios. Other than the obvious fact that alcohol and weapons don't mix, alcohol greatly increases the "stupid factor" for both the archer and any bystanders. While I feel bad for anyone whose bow has been dry-fired, I'm reminded of what Forrest Gump's Mama always said: "Stupid is as stupid does." I won't belabor this point any further, suffice to say that Darwin takes effect here quite often.

TUNE UP, TUNE OUT

A third common cause I see for dry fires is someone working on or tuning their own bow. The human brain — especially



Sammy Romano is a lifelong hunter who has worked in the archery industry for more than 25 years. His expertise includes compounds and crossbows. He can be reached at samboka31@aol.com.

the male human brain — does not multi-task very well when performing unfamiliar tasks. I recently had a customer who had just dry-fired his bow once, dry-fire it again while tuning it for broadheads. His broadheads were hitting a half-inch to the right, and after adjusting his rest slightly to compensate, he forgot to put his arrow back in the bow. You can imagine his disgust when he released another empty string and his bow exploded for the second time in a week.

One customer derailed a bow twice and dry-fired his backup bow, all within three days. His wife purchased some lighted nocks for him online. After he derailed the first bow, he came in and purchased a new one. This was a Saturday, and he was leaving for Kansas on a big hunt in just a few days, so I restrung the original bow and rigged his new one on the spot.

I mentioned that his lighted nocks looked like they were inferior Chinese copies of a Nockturnal. On Monday morning, he was back with both bows blown up. The Chinese-made nocks were the culprit. The flimsy plastic from which they were made allowed them to disengage from the string at full draw. We got him fixed up, and he is in Kansas hunting as I'm typing this.

Most of the above issue could have been easily avoided by using a little common sense. Today's high-powered bows are not forgiving of dry fires or derails. Pulling these bows without a release will result in a string derailing if the bow is torqued even slightly. In many cases, this is even more damaging than a dry fire.

Never pull a bow unless you are using a release with an arrow loaded and are aiming at a safe target. A little good judgement now will save a lot of agony and expense later. Good luck this season. ■

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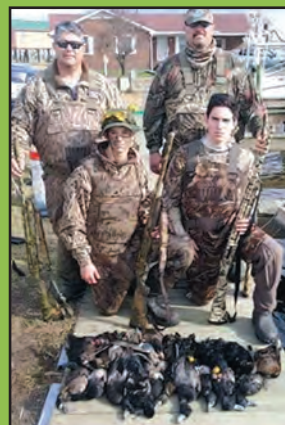
The bow suffered a splintered limb that was caused by a derail/dry-fire.

Sammy Romano

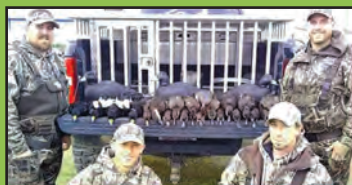
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GREENER PASTURES

Jeff Burleson

With most of their breeding responsibilities behind them, deer are in need of plenty of groceries when December arrives.



LAST CHANCE TACTICS

POUR THE FOOD TO LATE-SEASON DEER, SUPPLEMENTAL OR A LATE FOOD PLOT

Donna Brookshire

BY December, most hunters have killed their trophies and loaded up the freezer with venison steaks, sausage and enough burger to feed an army. But deer season is far from being over. The last month can be one of the best times to take that big 'ol buck that has eluded daylight encounters all season.

The best way to get a big deer to come back around is to bring him a something to eat and maybe even entice a lingering bed mate to a dinner date in a field of green.

Deer seasons in the Carolinas are some of the longest in the country. Most hunters bag their bucks either in pre-rut during bachelor-group season or during the peak of the rut when does and bucks are on their feet nearly the entire day and night. But everything slows down, and most does will be bred by Thanksgiving, if not earlier.

December is a unique time when hormonal rushes are subsiding, and a different need becomes painfully apparent. Deer have expended a ton of energy, and fat reserves are depleted. With the

season shifting into winter, the drive to eat increases with every passing day. High-quality food sources — or really, any reliable food source — can pull deer in from all over during December. And natural food sources are becoming more and more scarce.

HUNGRY BOYS, TOO

It is not just the does coming into reliable food sources. Mature and immature bucks that remain on a property will seek out solid food sources this time of year, and they will come in day or night.

That old buck that has eluded hunters all season will slip into these food sources and gobble up as much as he can. Hunters should not be surprised when they come in during the middle of the day, either. Even though these deer have been busy chasing each other all season, they have also noticed when hunters are coming into the woods, and a daytime visit isn't off the table. Deer are famished and want to eat.

REFRESH THE MENU

The quickest and easiest way to get deer to pile into an area you're covering from a

stand is always going to be supplemental feeding. Corn, sweet potatoes, soybeans or any other quick-energy source will bring deer in from afar and will keep them feeding, but they will eat it about as fast as you can dump it out, especially when temperatures drop below freezing after dark.

Fall food plots can be hotspots, especially when white clover, brassicas or other cool-season dominants are flourishing and providing ample nutritional options. But quite often, food plots get hit hard and can be diminished by December. A new food plot may sound like a waste of energy, but certain seeds can flourish and provide a solid food option for deer in winter. Luckily, soil temperatures remain moderate and are still providing a good list of options.



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.

Patches of newly sewn ryegrass will sprout quickly and green-up in time to provide plenty of food for deer.

CATCHER IN THE RYE

One of the best fall options for immediate returns is ryegrass. This quick green-up option will germinate nearly immediately and will erupt from the soil surface in 36 to 72 hours. Planting rye is an inexpensive option, too. It can be broadcast over a mildly worked seedbed at a rate between 50 to 100 pounds per acre. Ryegrass seed ranges some in price, but it's generally sold for around \$1 per pound, an inexpensive option for a late-season planting.

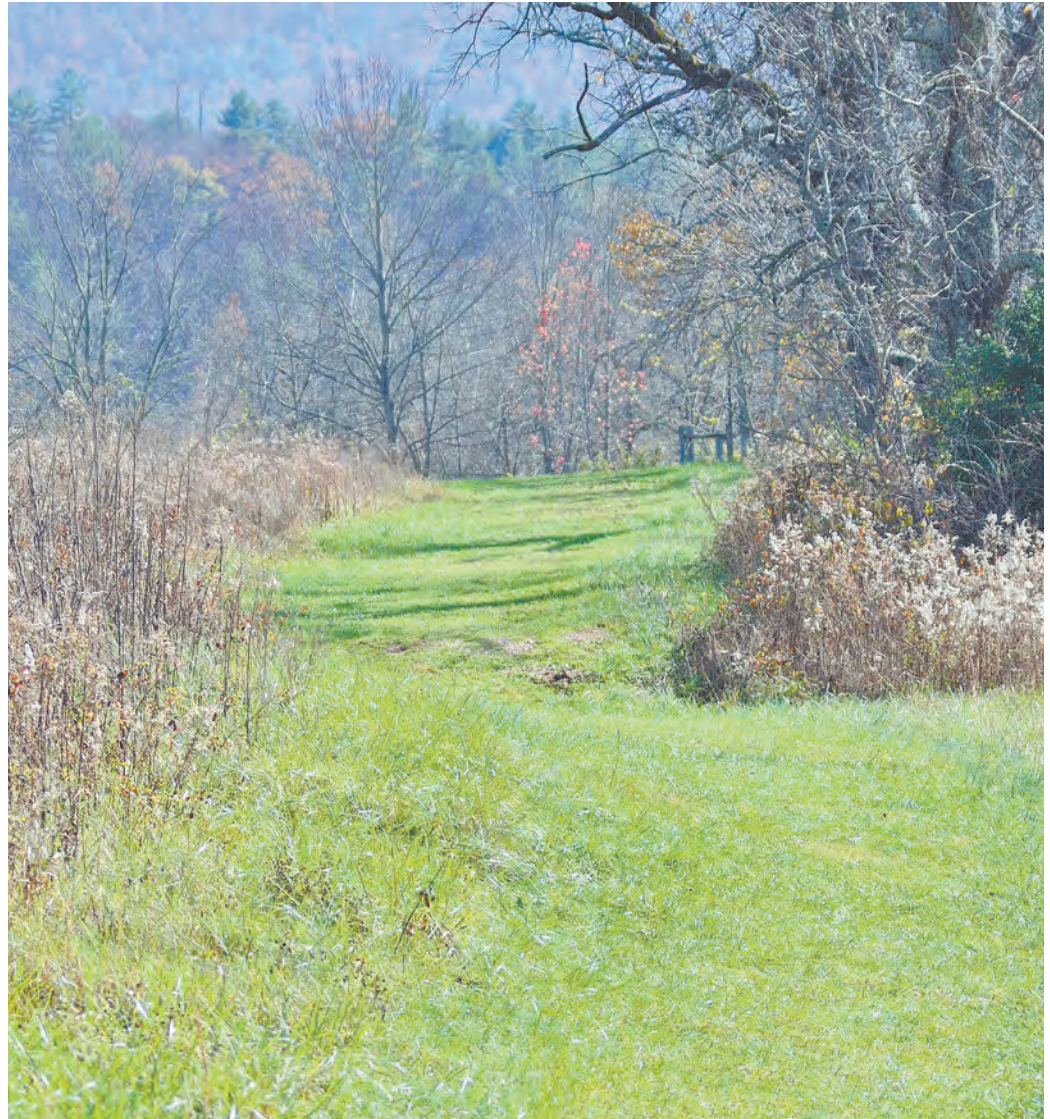
For best results, seed should be lightly covered using a chain harrow, only covering the seed approximately ¼- to ½-inch. It's always good to apply some fertilizer at planting to provide ready nutrients.

While there are specialized fertilizers available, any balanced fertilizer at a rate of 200 pounds per acre will help jump-start this seed and provide the necessary nutrients for a quick green up.

Ryegrass is easily digestible for deer; it provides 15% to 20% crude protein. Rye may not be as tasty as yellow gold, but deer sure will flock to a newly emerging crop in December. Fortunately, ryegrass prefers cooler temperatures and will grow all winter and into the spring.

December may not be the perfect time to plant food plots or hunt deer. But is it? For the diehard trophy hunters out there, December can bring big rewards to hunters with dedication in the woods because that mature buck may just step out on a newly planted rye plot with food on the brain. ■

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Jeff Burleson

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Phillip Gentry

Great public-land deer are available to hunters like Jedediah Stern (below), who can get off the beaten path in a kayak and outsmart these animals.



PADDLE UP A BUCK

KAYAKS CAN GET DEER HUNTERS INTO VIRGIN TERRITORY

Kayaks were used for hunting by native Americans for centuries before Europeans landed in North America.

Although hunting tactics have evolved, the old ways never completely go out of style and certainly still work.

That's where Jedediah Stern of Lexington, S.C., fits in. Stern is a dedicated bowhunter and videographer who had the idea of using a kayak to get him deeper into public land than he could get without stomping through the hunting grounds from some distant road.

While doing some virtual scouting, Stern noticed a small piece of public land situated in South Carolina's Midlands that was surrounded by private land but accessible by water via a small but navigable creek.

"I found this tract of public land a couple years ago and put a camera in a likely looking spot," he said. "When I checked the camera, there were a couple of really nice bucks on it, so I started planning."

Stern hunted the spot, which he described as "back of a cove," twice last season and harvested one doe. Then, on Oct. 16, he launched his Sun Dolphin sit-on-top kayak at 4 a.m., complete with

camera gear and his lightweight saddle stand gear, prepared to make a go of it.

"Around 9 a.m., I hadn't seen anything worthwhile and was starting to wonder if I'd picked the wrong spot," Stern said. "I saw a doe working her way toward me and decided I'd just take her and move on. I was at full draw when I caught movement out of the corner of my eye."

A massive, 12-point buck was making its move on the doe, quartering in hard from the Stern's left. Stern stepped around his stand for a better shot, but the buck only offered a front-end shot. Stern placed his pin on the animal's chest and released the arrow.

"It happened so fast," he said. "I gave him 45 minutes, then got down and immediately found a good blood trail, but no arrow."

After tracking the deer for 20 yards, he found his arrow in a pool of blood, and in another 50 yards, he couldn't believe his eyes. There lay a mature, 190-pound buck with a large, main-frame 10-point rack and two stickers. Stern is confident the deer will make the South Carolina record book minimum of 125 inches.

Stern retrieved his camera setup and was reliving the hunt on film when he



Jedediah Stern

heard a noise behind him.

"It was the No. 2 buck I had on camera," he said. "It came in behind me while I was filming and blew at me and stomped off."

Completing his hunt documentary, Stern then set about field-dressing, skinning and caping the deer. He carefully bagged and packed the meat and loaded his kayak for the 2-mile paddle out.

"I do all my own processing and am considering doing my own taxidermy mount of the deer," he said. "For it all to go down like this and get it on camera in such a remote area, it was the best South Carolina hunt I've had since moving here from Oklahoma 6 years ago." ■



Phillip Gentry of Waterloo, S.C., is host of "PG & Boat Girl Outdoors" podcast and a veteran outdoor writer.

HUNT A SADDLE STAND

Bowhunter Jedediah Stern credits much of his hunting and paddling success on being able to gain access to areas quietly, without disturbing deer. He also touts hunting from a saddle stand with allowing him to minimize how much weight he brings in with him, in case he has to add another 100 pounds of deer to his trip out.

Saddle-stand hunting has been popular in many areas around the country for years, but it is seeing a resurgence in popularity, particularly with public-land hunters who have to bring their stands to the woods with him and may have long journeys to get to their desired hunting location.

"I put the harness on before I leave the drop in area," Stern said, "so I'm wearing it while I paddle in, and then it's just a matter of carrying one climbing stick and the small platform, and I can be in the tree and set up, ready to hunt in less than 5 minutes."

Stern constructed his own saddle-hunting system by using a climbing harness he owned and adding a lineman's rope and 30-foot length of rope to a commercially made climbing stick and foot platform that he can attach to the tree and reset to work his way up.

Several manufacturers have capitalized on the recent surge in popularity of saddle-stand hunting, some even offering complete kits that include the harness that supports the hunter while in the tree, all of the ropes used for safety, ascension and descending, as well as the climbing sticks and stand platform.

The surge in popularity with saddle hunting is especially appealing to bowhunters, due to the ability to hunt on the backside of a tree that may not be completely straight and without cutting down branches that help hide the hunter.

Saddle hunters generally set up facing the direction in which the deer are expected to travel. This allows the hunter to keep the tree trunk between him and the deer's line of sight, hiding the hunter from the deer's view and eliminating his outline completely.



A saddle stand is light for kayak transport and allows hunters to set up quickly upon arrival at their spot.

If a deer approaches from the hunter's offside, the saddle stand makes it easy enough to shuffle around the tree or turn around and draw on the deer without a lot of movement and noise.

For kayak hunters, saddle stand weights are measured in ounces rather than pounds, as is the case with traditional climbing stands and store in a small bag versus rigid aluminum framing that must be strapped down to the boat. ■

DECEMBER'S BEST BETS

NORTH CAROLINA

WHAT — White-tailed deer

WHERE — Uwharrie National Forest

HOW — The Uwharrie River, crosses the national forest in several areas and has numerous spur creeks where kayak anglers can go deep into the 50,000-acre tract and get away from hunting pressure.

LAUNCH — Low Water Bridge Road, Troy, N.C., and Troy Boat Ramp, Candor, N.C.

INSIDER TIP — Areas closed to hunting and archery-only areas exist within Uwharrie. Look at maps published by the U.S. Forest Service to get accurate information.

SOUTH CAROLINA

WHAT — White-tailed deer

WHERE — Sumter National Forest, Enoree Ranger Zone.

HOW — Sumter National Forest is not contiguous, so a map provided by the US Forest Service is critical to make sure you are hunting public land.

LAUNCH — The Tyger, Enoree, and Broad rivers, along with numerous navigable creeks, traverse the national forest. Dump-in spots are found at most bridge crossings, but do your homework to make sure.

INSIDER TIP — Saddle stands are the easiest, quietest and lightest stands for packing in a kayak. If you are not familiar with them, you may want to check them out.



BLACK DRUM ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED BY INSHORE FISHERMEN, UNTIL THEY HOOK UP WITH ONE. HERE'S HOW TO MAKE THAT HAPPEN MORE THAN JUST BY CHANCE.

THE DECEMBER

■ By Jeff Burleson

DRUM

WINTER ARRIVES THIS MONTH, ALONG WITH *COLDER WEATHER.*

The crisp mornings tend to move anglers into the deer woods or duck blinds, but the Carolinas can offer excellent winter action for a wide variety of inshore species.

Speckled trout and redfish, aka spot-tailed bass or puppy drum, rank at the top of inshore boards, yet a black drum often shows up on the end of the line, carrying a big stick with no intentions of coming aboard easily. And late fall and winter are prime times to load the boat with these black bombshells.

Black drum rarely receive the praise their bronzed cousins get, but they are no lesser species by any stretch of the imagination. They carry characteristics with other drum species and are built like a Division I noseguard with a bad attitude. For a light-tackle angler with 10-pound test line spooled on the reel, a testy battle can be just what the doctor ordered.

Like all drum species, black drum patrol the sea floor and are often classified as bottom feeders, equipped with sensory barbels on their chins. Shrimp, mole crabs, fiddler crabs and even small fish make up their diets through most of their range. In the Carolinas, they'll eat everything, but shrimp and small crabs become their primary meals in late fall and into the winter.

Tom Cushman of Captain Cush's Calmwater Fishing Charters guides out of Little River, S.C., and catches his fair share of black drum throughout the year in the estuaries straddling the North Carolina-South Carolina state line. His black drum bite really takes off in late fall.

"Black drum are available throughout the year in our area, but we catch a lot more of them in fall through spring," said Cushman (843-997-5850). "The bite picks up substantially when the water cools."

Black drum are similar to speckled trout: a local population exists year-round, but more arrive in the fall when the water cools. They are migratory and travel south when the waters cool to the north. Conversely, black drum move back to northern waters in the spring when water temperatures rise.

Black drum can be found in a wide variety of areas. As water temperatures dip below 65 degrees, they move into deeper areas, but they won't move too far from the dinner table. Fortunately, they are in good company. Speckled trout and redfish move into deep holes and channels, along with any available bait in the area. Black drum have voracious appetites and are often found in schools.

✕ Reds and speckled trout are often at the top of an inshore fisherman's fall menu, but black drum can make many a trip a success.



"Black drum eat mostly shrimp and small crabs," Cushman said. "We catch a lot of black drum while floating live shrimp for trout, but they will eat fresh and frozen shrimp, too."

Speckled trout feast on live shrimp and generally turn their noses up when the shrimp die, lose their flutter or are severed in any shape or form. Black drum are delighted to get the opportunity to eat a live shrimp but are satisfied with leftovers, whether just the head, tail or any morsel remains. They will rarely refuse a chunk of cut shrimp, whether freshly caught or sourced from the bottom of the freezer. Fresher bait will perform better than old bait.

"Frozen shrimp can catch fish, but fresh bait is always a better sell," Cushman said.

Fiddler crabs are often used for sheepshead around jetties, bridge pilings and nearshore reefs. Fiddler crabs are a delicacy for black drum and can put fish in the boat quickly when they're around, even if they're acting finicky. They will eat almost anything when they are famished and in a feeding frenzy.

"Some days, black drum are feeding like a school of piranhas, where they will eat anything you put in the water, and on other days, they can be a little finicky — like all fish get sometimes," he said. "When they get finicky, we make sure to have very fresh shrimp or live fiddlers."

Cushman will use a float rig for live shrimp unless he's fishing structure, deep channels or places with heavy current, where a dropper rig is good. Float rigs remain good options for cut shrimp floated barely above structure. The float reduces hang-ups and allows the bait to free-float in the current.

Black drum inhabit a wide variety of places in the Carolinas, including nearshore reefs and about every type of habitat in inshore waters. They prefer feeding around structure: docks, rocks, oyster bars, grass edges or shell-covered bottoms. They will scavenge the bottom, feeling for scraps to eat, but they prefer to settle along structure-laden bottoms in heavy current and wait on their meals to come freely.

"Places with heavy current tend to hold more black drum than areas with gentle or no current at all. They sit along the bottom and pick off shrimp getting washed by them in the current," he said.

The Carolinas' coastlines are littered with prime places to catch black drum in winter, but the best in winter tend to be deep, shell bottoms in creek bends, deep rocky shorelines along main channels, inshore reefs and other structure-laden habitats. The Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway spans the entire coastline with a wide offering of habitat for black drum in winter.



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.





“In the ICW, channel ledges with oyster or shell bottoms are excellent places — or docks and boat slips,” Cushman said. “Boat slips can be great, because they will be wallowed out and deeper than the surrounding water.”

Black drum can grow to 100 pounds, but most in inshore waters, they rarely exceed 20 pounds unless they’re found in deep-water habitats. And if a big black drum is anticipated, deep channels with excessive current and structure can produce the biggest fish. While a 60-pound black drum can be exciting to land, a 7½-pound black drum can take a light-tackle angler’s gear to its critical limits.

Black drum are sometimes considered by-catch, but they should be a prized species for their sheer power and liberal feeding behavior. ■

CHECK OUT JETTIES FOR BLACK DRUM >



✗ Baits or lures crawled across the bottom will often come in contact with a black drum in late fall and early winter. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** It’s not unusual to catch red drum and black drum in the same general areas, even on the same pieces of structure.

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CHECK OUT JETTIES FOR BLACK DRUM

Black drum are typically targeted or caught inshore: around docks, shell banks and deep, shell-lined holes in the marsh. But every black drum enters an estuary from the ocean and must pass between rock-lined jetties that are excellent places to find a big school of black drum over winter.

Jetties — think Oregon Inlet, Masonboro Inlet, Little River Inlet, Murrells Inlet, Winyah Bay and Charleston Harbor — are the

✕ Jetties that line inlets along the shorelines of North Carolina and South Carolina attract plenty of black drum, which feed in the swift current around the jetty rocks.



Jeff Burleson



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perfect combination of structure, water depth and current that black drum love.

Guide Tom Cushman loves fishing jetties for black drum during the winter.

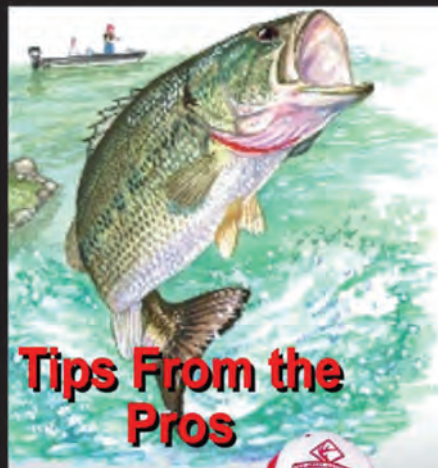
"Black drum are structure-oriented fish," Cushman said. "And these fish will school up at the jetties in winter."

Black drum have everything they need at the jetties and will often school up in very large schools near the jetty rocks themselves.

"It's not uncommon to get on a steady bite of black drum at the jetties, and sometimes you can even catch a trophy," he said.

Cushman will fish all parts of jetties, including the insides, outsides, near the ends, and everywhere in between. He recommends fishing areas with current for black drum, and usually, the deeper places along the jetties offer better opportunities for these fish than areas with slack current.

Typically, the current will be greater on the inside than the outsides of jetties, but when a lot of fish are at the jetties, the outsides will also have plenty of fish available to catch. ■



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■ By Mike Marsh

THE CAROLINAS OFFER PLENTY OF GOOD SMALL-GAME HUNTING ON PUBLIC LANDS. HERE ARE A HANDFUL OF SPOTS TO BE CONSIDERED FOR SQUIRREL, QUAIL, RABBIT AND THE LIKE.

THINK SMALL, GO BIG

Across the Carolinas, small-game hunting seasons are in full swing. While many hunters seek these opportunities — beyond those hours-long still hunts for deer or a morning-long session in a boat or blind waiting for ducks — most small-game hunters still make a big mistake by hunting only on private lands.

For hunters who are willing to drive a few miles and adhere to an additional layer of regulations, the reward of visiting public land, especially a vast, national wildlife refuge, can be a heavier game bag at the end of a day, plus a ton of extra Fitbit paces.

Try these big public tracts out for size and see if things don't work out.

PEE DEE NWR

PRIMARY SPECIES: QUAIL

OTHER SPECIES: RABBIT,
GRAY SQUIRREL

Located near Wadesboro, N.C., the 8,400-acre Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge is a great place to hunt bobwhite quail. Greg Walmsley, the refuge manager, said intensive man-

agement of the pine forest habitat, balanced with low hunting pressure, has improved quail numbers.

"We have seven days of quail hunting on alternating Wednesdays and Saturdays," Walmsley said. "Limiting the pressure has created a better hunting opportunity, and I would say we have low to moderate participation. Limiting hunting dates also decreases competition between other users. We call them the 'Big Six' — hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, environmental education, interpretation and photography."

Walmsley said that, over the past 10 years, rotational burning of a good component of the refuge's longleaf pine forest, as well as thinning cuts that have opened up the canopy to improve the quality of "wet longleaf flatwood." It is a rare, but significant habitat type that is extremely beneficial to quail and other upland game.

"We also have a cooperative farming program for planting corn and soybeans on hundreds of acres," he said. "Many of those farmed areas also have field borders that benefit quail. Observational information from officers in the field show our quail numbers are higher than they are on other similar properties nearby. We have a strong, sustainable population with good numbers of coveys of wild birds."

POCOSIN LAKES NWR ➤

At Carolina Sand Hills NWR and Pee Dee NWR the daily bag limit for bobwhite quail is two. This helps promote a quality hunting experience.



POCOSIN LAKES NWR

PRIMARY SPECIES: RABBIT

OTHER SPECIES: QUAIL, RACCOON

Located near Columbia, N.C., the 10,000-acre Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is an excellent place for rabbit hunting. Wendy Stanton, the refuge manager, said work to provide early successional habitat is key.

“We have a lot of rabbit hunters,” Stanton said. “While we see coveys of quail, we have fewer quail hunters than rabbit hunters. To provide early successional habitat, we mow the east-west roads on a rotational basis. The roads not open to vehicle traffic, as well as the shoulders of roads open to vehicles, provide good hunting access and cover for upland game.”

Recently, the refuge has experimented with herbicide applications to reduce woody vegetation. About two miles of one road comprising 50 acres have been treated. In the future, more of these herbicide-managed areas should increase rabbit- and quail-hunting opportunities. Hunters should look for areas that have abundant broom sedge, goldenrod and panic grass.

Non-toxic shot must be used in the designated non-toxic shot area west of Evans Road. While the cooperative farming areas of the Pungo Unit are open for deer hunting, they are not open for small-game hunting. Raccoon/opossum hunters must obtain a free permit at the office.

CAROLINA SANDHILLS NWR

PRIMARY SPECIES: QUAIL

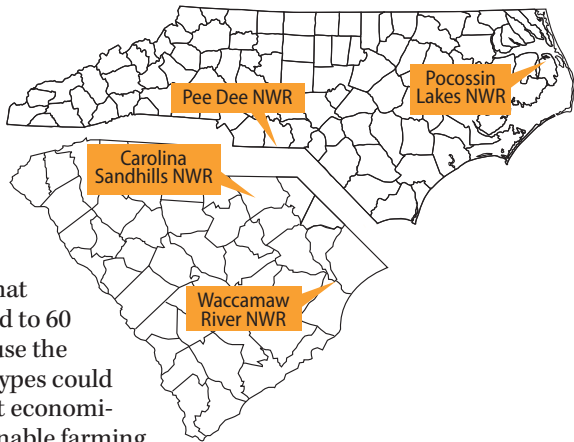
SECONDARY SPECIES: WOODCOCK,
RABBIT, RACCOON

Located near McBee, S.C., the 46,000-acre Carolina Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge has excellent hunting for bobwhite quail. In fact, it is so good, Lyne Atkins, the refuge manager, said it is one of South Carolina’s Bobwhite Quail Focal Areas.

“Four areas in South Carolina participate in the national Bobwhite Quail Initiative,” Atkins said. “These properties are designated where quail habitat can be enhanced and populations increased. We believe that goal is compatible with our other field activities. However, rather than a buckshot approach, we concentrate our quail habitat-enhancement activities on about 2,500 acres in the Mays Lake area. The area is designated by blue-and-white signs.”

Other areas within the refuge also have good quail habitat, manipulated by timber-management practices and prescribed burning. At one time, the refuge also had 1,200 acres of cooperative





farm fields. However, that has declined to 60 acres because the sandy soil types could not support economically sustainable farming.

“The remaining 60-acre area is planted in various types of millet year-to-year, with 25% of the millet remaining in the field after harvest,” she said. “It is located near the refuge office on Wildlife Drive. We also have wild plum thickets all around the refuge and established them in the Quail Focal Area. Wild plum thickets provide excellent cover for quail.”

Quail hunting dates are spaced every 10 to 14 days; they attract a core of faithful hunters. Atkins expects the number of hunters to increase as the hunting improves and word gets around.

WACCAMAW RIVER NWR ➤

The author walks up on a point behind Face, an English setter. Working a pointing dog in early successional habitat is the trick to finding quail on NWRs. **BELOW:** Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge has good hunting on cooperative farming areas. Rabbits and quail are abundant along the edges.



DESTINATION INFORMATION

WHERE TO GO:

The Pee Dee NWR's office is at 5770 US 52 North, Wadesboro, N.C., 28170. Telephone: 704-694-4424. Website: fws.gov/refuge/pee_dee. A hunting brochure must be downloaded or obtained in person at the office and signed and carried. No refuge fee is required for small game hunting.

The Pocosin Lakes NWR office is at 205 South Ludington Dr., Columbia, N.C.; the mailing address is PO Box 329, Columbia, N.C. 27925. Telephone: 252-796-3004. Website: fws.gov/refuge/pocosin_lakes. A \$15 refuge hunting permit is required for hunters age 16 and older. It can be purchased by mail, online or in person at the refuge office. Brochures may be requested by a note accompanying a mailed check.

The Carolina Sandhills NWR office is at US 1, McBee, S.C., 23734. Telephone 843-335-8350. Website: fws.gov/refuge/carolina_sandhills. No refuge fees are required for hunting small game. A hunt brochure can be downloaded at or obtained in person at the office and must be signed and carried. Hunters are asked to complete a voluntary small game hunting survey. No refuge or WMA fees are required for small game hunting.

The Waccamaw River NWR office is at 21424 N. Fraser St., Georgetown, S.C.; the mailing address is P.O. Box 1439, Georgetown, S.C., 29440. Telephone: 843-527 8069. Website: southeast.fws.gov/waccamaw. No refuge or WMA fees are required for small game hunting.

WHEN TO GO:

The Pee Dee NWR is open for quail hunting in Anson County only, Nov. 4, 2021, Dec. 4, 15, 25, 2021, and Jan. 5, 15 and 26, 2022. The daily bag limit is two quail, and no woodcock may be taken. Other small-game seasons include gray squirrels, Nov. 22–Dec. 11, 2021 and rabbit, Jan. 29, 2021–Feb. 12, 2022.

The Pocosin Lakes NWR is open for small-game hunting during seasons established by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

The Carolina Sandhills NWR is open for quail hunting Nov. 26, Dec. 8, 17 and 29, 2021, and Jan. 7, 19, 28 and Feb. 9 and 18, 2022. The bag limit is two quail. Woodcock may be taken during quail hunts when South Carolina's woodcock season is open. Other small-game seasons include rabbit — Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays during December 2021 and January 2022; raccoon/opossum — Dec. 6 and 11, 2021, Jan. 3, 8 and Feb. 7 and 12, 2022. The refuge has no squirrel season because it has little gray squirrel habitat and a desire to protect fox squirrels.

The Waccamaw River NWR is open for squirrel hunting Oct. 25 2021, to Feb. 19, 2022, except during deer or hog hunts. No fox squirrels may be taken, and no hunting is allowed on Sundays or from watercraft. Woodcock and waterfowl hunting is allowed Wednesdays and Saturdays until noon on Unit 1 tracts along the Great Pee Dee River only. Snipe hunting is allowed on Unit 3 on Wednesdays and Saturdays from Feb. 2 until the end of Federal season. Non-toxic shot is required. Raccoon/opossum season is open Wednesday and Saturday nights Feb. 2-26.

MAPS:

Maps of refuges and hunting areas within them are available on the refuges' websites, along with hunt brochures.



WACCAMAW RIVER NWR

PRIMARY SPECIES:

GRAY SQUIRREL

SECONDARY SPECIES: WOODCOCK, SNIPE, RACCOON

Located near Conway, S.C., the 55,000-acre Waccamaw NWR has some of the best squirrel hunting in South Carolina. Craig Sasser, the refuge manager, said flooding can lead to poor squirrel hunting access; however, this year, the water has been low.

“This year we are in good shape, but we have been underwater for several seasons in a row,” Sasser said. “Our mast production is hit or miss, but in the upland areas of the refuge this fall, laurel, white and water oaks are really dropping acorns. One of the best places, if not the best, for hunting squirrels in South Carolina is Bull Island. The downside is that it is only accessible by boat.”

Port Harrelson Landing on Bull Creek and Yauhannah Landing on the Pee Dee River provide excellent water access. Several parties have taken limits of gray squirrels despite refuge

Carol Marsh used a .22 rimfire rifle to take these gray squirrels.

regulations that allow only one squirrel dog per hunter.

At Yauhannah Landing, trails running on both sides of the highway provide good access for squirrel hunting,” he said. “Squirrels there don’t see a lot of humans, so they are not as wary as they are in other areas, and that makes for some great still-hunting. While anywhere along Bull Creek and the Pee Dee River that has oak trees is a good place to hunt, another top tract in that area is near the Yauhannah Lake Bridge between Yauhannah Lake and the Pee Dee River. A portion of that tract is open only to youth hunts and is marked on the hunt brochure map. At Waccamaw NWR, we are gearing up to increase youth participation, and small game is a great way of doing that.” ■



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

ALL DOGS TO GO HEAVEN >



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Pat Robertson

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Pay careful attention to your dog's physical condition on early season bird hunts. Heat stroke is a distinct possibility



Bret Holten

DON'T TURN UP THE HEAT EARLY IN THE SEASON

WARM SPELLS CAN CAUSE PROBLEMS FOR BIRD DOGS THAT GET OVERHEATED FROM GREAT EFFORTS

Halloween weekend brought the kind of weather hunters wait all year for: cool, crisp air and sunny, blue skies littered with rows of drifting, puffy white clouds.

Jo Jo Denton's cell phone beeped with a text from a quail-hunting buddy, well-known bird sculptor and wood carver Grainger McCoy: "What a great day to run a bird dog."

An avid bird hunter for more than 65 years, Dr. Joe A. "Jo Jo" Denton (DVM) of Camden, S.C., now semi-retired, is often sought out by hunters in South Carolina's Midlands for advice on caring for their hunting dogs. He has seen first-hand, all too often, the result of a lack of care when a hunting dog falters. He pointed out that early season hunts can be dangerous for both hunters and their dogs.

"It would shock you to see all the dying, heat-stroke dogs at our vet clinics and emergency clinics during the early season," he said. "Don't let it happen to your dog."

Denton noted that "good" bird dogs run harder and are more intense than

other hunting breeds and thus are more susceptible to going down, especially on days when the temperature goes up. He recommends having water available at all times to help cool the dog's body.

SEE SYMPTOMS

"If the dog staggers, becomes despondent, his gums are beet red, he is panting excessively, will not accept water to drink or he collapses, it's time for you to move very quickly to get his body temp down, slowly and methodically," Denton said.

When hunting under dry-heat conditions that could create stress on a dog he recommends keeping a No. 5, 1-ounce electric thermometer in your hunting vest.

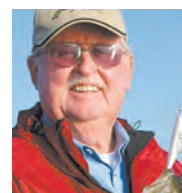
"Normal rectal temperature is 101.5° to 102.5°. Danger begins at about 105°. Brain damage begins about 109°, and you will be lucky to get him back to normal if this occurs. Cool him down slowly with cool-water toweling — not cold or ice and no alcohol bath — or by standing and wetting him in a pond or creek until

his temperature drops to about 103°, then stop and just make him comfortable. Now, it's time to find your vet."

Warm, early season temperatures and unseasonably hot days after cold weather presents another danger to both dogs and hunters, Denton said.

THE HISS FACTOR

"We do have to deal with cottonmouths when dogs are around water, as well as rattlers and copperheads right up until freezing weather sets in," he said. "I'll never forget walking up to a pointed dog in winter, and just under his steady nose was a coiled-up rattlesnake. I also remember on a December afternoon, kicking around a straw field, helping the dog find a dead bird when that pile of



Pat Robertson covered outdoors issues for more than 30 years for *The State* and *The Columbia Record* newspapers. Now retired, he is a full-time free-lancer living in Blythewood, S.C., where he and his wife, Jan, raise beagles and compete in field trials.

cow poop turned out to be an 8-pound rattlesnake," he said. "If it's warm and sunny in the Southeast, you have to be aware year-round for the pit vipers. Good dogs will point reptiles and even turtles and, God forbid, gators."

And he added: "Snake vaccine is available, and it does work."

HIS GREAT DOGS

When not volunteering his services as a veterinarian, Denton leads guided bird hunts on local plantations and continues to compete in bird-dog field trials, though not as actively as he did a decade ago. That was when he and his "once-in-a-lifetime" dog, Woodie Roost Scatter, dominated horseback field trials in the area.

"Scatter won S.C. Amateur Derby Dog of the Year to start her career in season 2004-05," he said. "She went on to win SC Amateur Shooting Dog of the Year for the next five years, leaving a record for folks to chase for a long time, I would imagine," Denton said, adding that Scatter and her sister, Woodie Roost Itchy, helped earn him Handler of the Year award four-straight years.

"She was my heart and soul," he said. "Her gravesite beside the koi pond on the farm makes a wonderful place to stop and thank God for all the wonderful things we are blessed with."

For a bird hunter, there is no more beautiful sight than a brace of bird dogs pointing a cove of quail.

"Man, how terrific it feels to load the dogs at daylight and head for the woods," Denton said. "You make sure to choose the right two bird dogs to handle this covey, because they know why we are here and can sometimes make themselves invisible. You and your buddy understand with a smile and turn the dogs loose. It doesn't get any better than this." ■



Dr. Jo Jo Denton is a veterinarian and a veteran bird hunter and dog trainer who is still going strong in semi-retirement.

HUNTING SEASONS

SPECIES	SEASON DATES (PRIVATE LAND)	BAG LIMIT	POSSESSION LIMIT
Doves	Sept. 4-6, Sept. 7-Oct. 2 Nov. 13-27, Dec. 17-Jan. 31, 2022	15	45
Crow	Nov. 1-March 1, 2022	No limits	
Quail	Nov. 22-March 1, 2022	12	36
Rabbit	Nov. 25-March 1, 2022	5	15
Squirrel	Oct. 1-March 1, 2022	10	30
Fox	Nov. 25-March 1, 2022	No limits	
Grouse	Nov. 25-March 1, 2021 (Game Zone 1 only)	3	9
Raccoon	Sept. 15-March 15, 2022 (statewide)	3 raccoons per party	
Opossum	Sept. 15-March 15, 2022	No limits	
Other furbearers	Nov. 25-March 1, 2020 (bobcat, otter, weasel, mink, muskrat, skunk)	No limits	
Bear	Game Zone 1	Oct. 17-23 (still hunting only) Oct. 24-30 (dogs)	
	Game Zone 2 (parts of Oconee, Pickens, Greenville, Spartanburg counties not in Game Zone 1)	Oct. 17-30 (still hunting only)	
	Game Zone 4 (Georgetown, Horry, Marion and Williamsburg counties)	Oct. 17-30 (still hunting only)	
Rails	Sept. 8-12, King & Clapper Sora & Virginia Gallinules (common/purple)	15 25 15	45 75 45
Snipe	Nov. 14 - Feb. 28, 2022	8	24
Woodcock	Dec. 18 - Jan. 31, 2022	3	9
Wild Turkey	March 22-April 30, 2022 (Game Zones 3&4) April 1-May 10, 2022 (Game Zones 1&2)	3 3	

DEER SEASON

ZONE	ARCHERY ONLY	PRIM WEAPON	GUNS
1		Oct. 1-10	Oct. 11-Jan. 1, 2022
2	Sept. 15-30	Oct. 1-10	Oct. 11-Jan. 1, 2022
3			Aug. 15-Jan. 1, 2022
4	Aug 15-31		Sept. 1-Jan. 1, 2022
Youth Days: Game Zone 1, Sept. 25, Jan. 8; Game Zone 2: Sept. 11, Jan. 8; Game Zone 3: Aug.14, Jan. 8; Game Zone 4: Aug. 14, Jan. 8.			

WATERFOWL SEASONS

SPECIES	DATES	BAG LIMIT
Duck	Teal only: Sept. 10-25 Nov. 20-27, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2022	6 6
Canada geese	Sept. 1-30, Nov. 20-27, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2022, Feb. 15-March 1, 2022	15 (Sept.) 5 (Others)
Blue/snow (light) geese	Nov. 20-27, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2022, Feb. 15-March 1, 2022	25
Brant	Dec. 13-Jan. 31, 2022	2
Sea ducks	Nov. 20-27, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2022	5
Mergansers	Nov. 20-27, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2022	5 (1 hooded)
Coots	Nov. 20-27, Dec. 12-Jan. 31, 2022	15

SOUTH CAROLINA'S RIVERS, COASTAL AND UPSTATE, ARE HAVENS FOR MIGRATING DUCKS AND THEREFORE, DUCK HUNTERS. HERE'S HOW TO BETTER FILL YOUR DUCK STRAP.

■ By Pat Robertson

SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER?

Kerlis Stone



There have been many memorable days when the sky was filled with ducks and the

HUNTING WAS OUTSTANDING

for lifelong hunter Karlos Stone of Johnsonville, S.C., but one day last season on Balloon Lake along the Big Pee Dee River is etched forever in his mind. What made that day special, he said, was following their passion with his son, Drake, and Drake's Labrador retriever, Yeti.

"We only killed four ducks, but the dog worked perfectly," Stone said. "When my son shot one bird and I shot another, the dog marked them both and made excellent retrieves. It all just made for a great day of duck hunting."

Stone hunts the sloughs, swamps, oxbows and backwater ponds along the Big Pee Dee, Black and Lynches rivers, plus the wider, slower waters of those streams as they flow towards the ocean and are transformed into broad waterfowl havens by the ebb and flow of the tides.

Across South Carolina, on the Savannah River downstream of Thurmond Dam at Clarks Hill, Noel Brown of North Augusta, S.C., has been hunting ducks for most of his life. One of his favorite memories is hunting a big island in the river when he was younger.

"We'd camp out all night and watch the ducks come in during late afternoon: wood ducks, mallards, green-winged teal. The next morning, we'd go out to the island very early to shoot. We had some great duck hunting days on that island," said Brown, adding with a tinge of sadness in his voice.

"I was a younger man then, and I would like to do that again, but at this point in life, I am not able to."

South Carolina's rivers and their associated waterways are home to tens of thousands of ducks during the annual migration. Savvy hunters cash in on that.



Noel Brown

For Brown, reaching the age when many settle into a rocking chair just meant altering his approach to continue enjoying his love of duck hunting. While he still hunts the sloughs and oxbows along the rolling Savannah, he concentrates most of his waterfowling efforts on his farm near Jackson, S.C.

“I hunt all up and down the Savannah River, from below Clarks Hill Dam down to my farm,” he said. “Ducks come and go on the river, and there are no guarantees, but hunting at my place down at Jackson is sure fire. We grow corn in the impoundments, and the ducks love it.”

While Stone’s and Brown’s hunting areas are both located along rivers, they are different because one is near the coast and the other is well inland, but they both agree one thing is constant: to be successful, you have to go where the ducks are — and that means scouting is a necessity.

“You can’t just go out on Saturday morning and hope to kill a duck,” Brown said. “You have to go two or three days a week, looking for ducks and places to set up. If you find a slough and ducks are there, that’s a place to hunt.”

Stone agreed. “If you don’t do a little bit of scouting, you are wasting your time going hunting.”

Stone is not just looking for numbers of ducks when he is scouting. He is looking for places that ducks likely will use.

“First, you want to find a place that is open enough so you can see, but woodies like thick woods, more dense with vegetation,” he said. “They will land in open water and then swim to those areas, so find a good pothole in the woods that is shallow. If the water is more than 18 inches deep, they can’t reach anything on the bottom.”

Scouting during the season may be necessary for a good hunt, but preseason scouting can provide for a successful season, according to Molly Kneece, waterfowl biologist for the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. While most of the seasonal duck migration is north to south, Kneece said many of the ducks in the Upstate migrate in from the west, flying over the mountains into South Carolina and following the rivers in search of food and resting areas before moving south.

“When preseason scouting, look for mast seed in flooded river bottoms: red oak and white oak acorns. Mallards really prefer

Find red and white oaks bordering a river bottom and you’ve got a leg up on locating a place that will be used by mallards.





Wood ducks love the thick cover associated with swampy, bottomland areas.

are keys to successfully hunting the myriad streams that cross South Carolina from the mountains to the ocean.

For Stone and Brown, a successful hunt is the goal on the rivers, but the preparation and scouting are just as important — and the camaraderie that comes with it is essential.

“Scouting is as much fun as the hunt,” Stone said. “I enjoy the fellowship with my buddies in the boat, riding and looking.” ■



Pat Robertson covered outdoors issues from the swamps to the state house over more than 30 years for *The State* and *The Columbia Record* newspapers. Now retired, he is a full-time free-lancer living in Blythewood, S.C., where he and his wife, Jan, raise beagles and compete in field trials.

RIVERS AREN'T ALL THE SAME >

red oak acorns,” she said.

While most hunters tend to work the larger river basins, Kneece said smaller rivers also hold ducks and provide the same opportunities.

“The smaller rivers are sometimes overlooked, but sometimes the birds get less pressure on these small rivers, and they are easier to work,” she said.

Big rivers, small rivers, rivers impounded to create huge lakes and rivers that flow into the ocean and are subject to the daily ebb and flow of tides all are roadways for ducks. The sloughs, marshes, oxbows and adjacent ponds all provide havens for the migrating birds, giving them opportunities to feed and rest on their journey. Locating potential stopping points for ducks and putting in the time to scout for groups of birds

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RIVERS AREN'T ALL THE SAME

Duck hunting along slow-moving, coastal rivers often takes a different approach than hunting the same birds along the sometimes fast-moving waters of the Savannah River downstream from Clarks Hill Dam.

"You sometimes have to go a long way to get to the right spot, so you have to have a fast boat," said Noel Brown, who has hunted the Savannah River for decades.

On the Pee Dee, Black and Lynches rivers, a shallow-draft boat is the ticket, according to Carlos Stone, who has spent a lifetime hunting the coastal rivers.

"You want an aluminum boat that will float in shallow water, and you need a push pole because at some point you are going to be right up on the land," he said.

While Brown said he has never drifted a boat blind in the Savannah, he does cover his boat with camo. "Other than that, we just hide in the reeds," he said.

But downstate, Stone finds a good boat blind is a necessity at times.

"Some people think you have to go high-tech, but you can take just about anything and make a good boat blind," he said. "I've hunted many days with just burlap draped around the boat, and it works really well. But our favorite boat blind is built out of conduit and dog-kennel wire, 2x4 wire that you can weave weeds in."

A few decoys come in handy when hunting mallards along the Savannah River, Brown said, but Stone often uses a dozen or more decoys on his hunts.



Depending on whether you're hunting coastal or inland rivers, the perfect duck boat can take on different sizes, shapes and camouflage.

Darren Digby

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"We have 12 regular decoys, and we have 12 that we used to call super-magnums that we use, especially down around the coast," Stone said. "Our rivers are dark, so ring-neck decoys work really well because they have a lot of white on them."

Last, but not least, is a duck call, Stone said.

"If you have a couple dozen decoys and a good boat blind, get a really good duck call — and keep it in your pocket," he said. ■

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Carrying a pocket knife is part of the daily routine for a lot of men, and TRUE has brought to market a perfect knife for the tasks that pop up at work, at home and everywhere in between.

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The jacket is available in black, blue, and San Sal and Erie camo. Pants are available in black.

MSRP: \$110-\$120 per item.

For more info, visit:
www.hukgear.com

CZ UPLAND ULTRALIGHT ALL-TERRAIN

If you love to hunt small game, but a day in the woods following a pack of beagles leaves you tired and sore for more than a few hours, maybe you need to lighten your load.

That's where CZ's Upland Ultralight All-Terrain shotgun fits in. Winner of a 2020 Outdoor Life Editor's Award, this little over-and-under can be a joy to carry, whether you're busting bunnies, following a pointer or climbing in the mountains in search of a ruffed grouse.

In 20-gauge, the gun tips the scales at just 5.2 pounds; in 12-gauge, it's a mere 6 pounds. Both of those models feature 26-inch

barrels with 3-inch chambers and five screw-in chokes: full, modified, improved-modified, improved cylinder and cylinder bore.

The gun is only 43 3/4 inches long. It comes with a Turkish walnut stock featuring a pistol grip. The trigger is selectable.

MSRP: \$809

For more info, visit: <https://cz-usa.com/product/cz-upland-ultralight/>





■ By Craig Holt

WHERE HAVE ALL THE ROCKFISH, AKA STRIPED BASS, THAT USED TO SWIM IN HIGH ROCK AND OTHER YADKIN RIVER RESERVOIRS BEEN HIDING? FISHERMEN WANT TO KNOW.

HIGH ROCK'S MISSING ROCKS

HIGH ROCK LAKE

was the site of the Striped Bass Challenge, a tournament that attracted the region's top rockfish chasers to the 15,180-acre Yadkin River impoundment this past January.

"I fished it with 93 other boats," said Jerry Hill, a striper guide from Lexington, N.C. "That day, the water temperature dropped below 50, and the lake was muddy red with a lot of stuff floating in it."

A cold, muddy, flotsam-filled lake doesn't ignite a hot winter bite for most freshwater species, especially stripers, which prefer clear water and easily visible baitfish.

"Three guys in a jon boat and trolling motor fished on the bottom with bass minnows," Hill said. "They caught a 6-pound striper and a 5-pound hybrid and won."

"Nobody else weighed in a fish."

That anemic catch wasn't a shock to local anglers. They have witnessed paltry catches the past two years on High Rock.

"I keep records of where, when, what kind of weather and baits I use," said Hill, 65. "The last time I did well at High Rock was Oct. 8, 2020. I caught nine stripers; a buddy caught nine and another guy caught eight. Even then, they were small for

High Rock, 6 to 9 pounds.

"The past five years, we've seen stripers like that, where normally the largest ones used to weigh 11 to 15 pounds, some bigger."

Lexington's Maynard Edwards, a retired guide, who, like Hill, has targeted striped bass on Yadkin system lakes for nearly a half-century, agreed that something has changed the past two years, not only at High Rock but at other impoundments in the chain.

"No one's catching anything except small stripers — if they catch any," he said.

Heavy November rains the past two years may have affected the striper bite.

"More stripers are in Tuckertown now than any Yadkin lake," Edwards said, pointing to the reservoir just downstream from High Rock. "When we had big rains, they had to redo the launch ramps at (High Rock) because the lake flooded and washed out the boat ramp," Edwards said, searching for an explanation. "They had to replace it, but first they ran three (dam) gates wide open for days. Water was shooting up in the air. Stripers will follow current, so I think some probably went through the dam (into Tuckertown)."



Anglers once caught nice-size striped bass on the Yadkin River chain of lakes.

When conditions were optimal at High Rock in past years — clear water with a winter drawdown of several feet — anglers trolled the main-river channel with good success. Other techniques worked as well in winter. Six years ago, Edwards tried casting for largemouth bass around rocky bluffs in a feeder creek and accidentally hit a mother lode of striped bass.

He and two clients cast shallow-diving crankbaits and suspending jerkbaits at a steep bluff in Flat Swamp Creek. Surprisingly, they caught a dozen stripers, between 12 to 20 pounds.

“Rattling Rogues worked well that day,” he said. “I got a backlash, so I was trying to work it out of my reel. When I did and started to crank the handle, the Rogue twitched a couple times then went under when the line tightened. Then it started moving off. A 12-pound striper had it.”

Before then, Edwards hadn’t considered that threadfin shad might pile into the lake’s feeder creeks, followed by stripers.

When they first chased High Rock’s stripers years ago, Hill and Edwards trolled with planers, downriggers or lead core line to send shad or lures deep toward stripers patrolling the lake’s main channel. With live bait tough to find in winter, they trolled single- or tandem-rigged bucktails and soft-plastic swimbaits.

Edwards added a twist a few years ago, reducing his trolling speed to .01 mph, a tactic he named “strolling.” He used Water Bugz side planers to push lures 30 feet or more from his boat’s gunwales.

“I put out 30 feet of line, then add a planer board to pull (lures to the sides),” he said.

Single rods attached to rod holders on the gunwales and/or stern still dragged bucktails or soft-plastic lures at different depths behind his boat, so he covered lots of water.

Favorite winter lures included 5-inch Zoom Flukes and Alabama rigs that mimic baitfish schools. This technique worked at all four of the Yadkin’s bigger lakes: High Rock, Tuckertown, Badin and Tillery.



Hill said Badin Lake just downstream from Tuckertown, is the chain’s top striper destination.

“Badin is best striper lake on the Yadkin to catch numbers, but they only run 2 to 6 pounds,” he said. “You might catch a (rare) 7- to 10 pounder.”

Edwards believes Lake Tillery (downstream from Badin) has the biggest stripers, “but they’re also getting smaller, and floating grass is getting so bad, it’s hard to troll without fouling your rigs.”

Edwards and Hill may disagree about Tuckertown, Badin or Tillery as the best current Yadkin striper lake, but there’s no question old reliable High Rock isn’t so reliable any more. ■

A LITANY OF POTENTIAL PROBLEMS >



Photos by Craig Holt

Maynard Edwards often turns to old-school lures such as bucktails for striped bass. **ACROSS SPREAD:** At many N.C. inland lakes, birds will reveal where stripers are in a feeding frenzy.

DESTINATION INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE — High Rock Lake is south of Lexington, forming much of the border between Davidson and Rowan counties. I-85, US 52 and NC 8 provide the best access. Tuckertown, Badin and Tillery are downstream from High Rock, with many of the same access routes, plus NC 109 and US 52. For ramp locations, visit www.ncwildlife.org/Boating/Where-to-Boat.

WHEN TO GO — November and December

BEST TECHNIQUES — Troll live threadfin shad or shad, white or white/chartreuse bucktails Flukes or Alabama rigs using down-riggers, planers, leadcore line or side-planers. Rods should be

5½- to 6-foot medium-action with baitcasting reels spooled with 30-pound braid attached to 5 feet of 20-pound fluorocarbon leaders. To avoid hangups while trolling, check depth-finders often to avoid bottom structures.

FISHING INFO/GUIDES — Jerry Hill, Triad Fishing & Guide Service, 336-247-1265; Yadkin Lakes Guide Service, 336-247-1287; HWY 49 Sporting Goods, 704- 463-7053; Joe's Bait & Tackle, 704 982-8716. See also Guides & Charters in Classifieds

ACCOMMODATIONS — Visit Lexington, 866-604-2389, www.visitlexingtonnc.com; Stanly County Convention & Visitors Bureau, 704-986-2583, www.visitstanly.com; Rowan County Convention & Visitors Bureau, 704-638-3100, www.visitsalisburync.com.

MAPS — DeLorme's N.C. Atlas & Gazetteer, 800-452-5931, www.delorme.com; Gemini Maps, 704- 846-1833, www.gemini-maps-of-north-carolina.com.

A LITANY OF POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

The Yadkin River system is made up of a string of lakes filled with naturally-reproducing large-mouth bass, crappie, white perch, bream catfish and baitfish.

But one of its fish species that must be stocked — striped bass — is in trouble.

Striper anglers and tournaments have experienced low catch rates and small fish in recent years.

No one has fingered the exact cause, although anglers have many theories:

- Extended periods of high water;
- Heavy fall and winter rains combined with few water releases by the new company that owns the system's four dams;
- Sporadic overflows that open downstream escape windows;
- Unsuccessful stockings;
- Years of angling pressure.

Casey Joubert, a N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission biologist, said previous samplings of Yadkin reservoirs showed that at least one striper had traveled 132 miles from W. Kerr Reservoir near Wilkesboro. Other species have travelled farther. The best explanation is migration through or over hydroelectric dams.

"We're going to do more sampling this winter and next, using a mix of nets and electrofishing," she said. "But it's a challenge to collect stripers with nets or shocking."

Additionally, the Commission's Watha Fish Hatchery in Pender County has limited space, so striper fingerlings have short stays before they're released in North Carolina lakes and rivers. Joubert said the Commission annually stocks a million hatchery-raised fingerling stripers.

Joubert said in May 2020, the Commission released 79,000 fingerlings at High Rock, 64,000 at Badin, 27,000 at Tillery and 13,000 at Tuckertown.

"We also stocked 672,000 fry in High Rock Lake last April, mostly because we had an abundance of fry — over the numbers requested from our biologists," she said.

However, angler Jerry Hill said a Commission biologist once told the Tar Heel Striper Club that stockings aren't quick fixes.

"He said it takes 3 years for a striper to grow to 5 or 6 pounds, so if (anglers) take out fish that size, it takes another 5 to 6 years to replace them," he said.

Joubert said predation of stocked fry and fingerlings by other species also could be a factor in low Yadkin striper numbers.

"We hope (by stocking enough) stripers will survive in the fishery," she said.

Joubert contacted dams operator Eagle Creek Renewable Energy

Former guide Maynard Edwards said High Rock stripers have gotten smaller and harder to catch over the past several years.



Craig Holt

about High Rock's winter water level, which hasn't been lowered for several years — former owner Alcoa had annual drawdowns.

"They said drawdowns are a function of rainfall/inflow," she said. "The last major drawdown was in 2018 (9½ feet), but the lake filled within 2 weeks. In 2019, servicing of units caused outages at the dam, and they couldn't lower the lake more than 2 feet."

Edwards and Hill contend talk is cheap, but seeing is believing.

"Four or five years ago, (the Commission) cut our (daily) limit from eight to four fish," Edwards said. "Biologists said they stocked the same number of stripers as always each year. But I know the past four years, it's been harder to catch four than it used to be to catch eight."

"There's still a problem somewhere." ■



Craig Holt of Snow Camp, N.C., has been an outdoor writer for almost 40 years, working for several newspapers, then serving as managing editor for *North Carolina Sportsman* and *South Carolina Sportsman* before becoming a full-time free-lancer in 2009.



Dusty Wilson

ALBEMARLE STRIPERS GANG UP

Prelude to spring spawning run gets cranked up this month

The author hefts a nice Albemarle Sound striper caught during the winter.

A By Dusty Wilson
 nglers who catch themselves daydreaming about the Roanoke River spring striper run in December are in luck because there's no reason to wait for warmer weather.

According to guide Jeff Onley of Elizabeth City, N.C., striped bass begin their spawning migration by swelling the Albemarle Sound and filling their bellies. Onley is well-prepared, with a number of tactics ranging from trolling to casting to schools to put hungry stripers in the boat.

"A lot of fish are going to be around the bridges," said Onley (252-333-6524), who runs Albemarle Fishing Charters. "The Wright Memorial Bridge, Mann's Harbor, and Albemarle Sound bridge will all be hot spots. Trolling close to the pilings is the key."

The Mann's Harbor and Albemarle Sound bridges are at opposite ends of the Albemarle Sound, but they fish similarly due to their water depth. At 20 to 25 feet, they are two of the deeper structures that Onley fishes, which means that deeper-diving crankbaits like Mann's Stretch 15s and 20s will be in order. He prefers these in blue/silver and chartreuse. A 1-ounce bucktail is also a good choice in white or chartreuse with a Gulp! swimming mullet trailer.

The Wright Memorial bridge stands in water only about 9 feet deep. Here, Onley will troll $\frac{3}{4}$ - and 1-ounce crankbaits, also in blue/silver, to stay in the strike zone.

At all locations, he trolls at a speed just above idle unless he is running into the wind and an additional bump is needed.

"December is also a great month for casting to structure at the mouths of the rivers," said Onley. "I'm using the same Rat-L-Traps I use for trolling. The fish will move up the Roanoke River as the month goes on, but the mouths of the Pasquatank, North and Little rivers will be good. Mostly what I'm casting to are the old trade piers that reach out into 7 to 9 feet of water."

One of the most-exciting ways to catch Albemarle Sound stripers in December is to target schooling fish feeding under birds. Step one is to find the diving birds that give away their location, which usually means a lot of riding and looking. Once Onley finds his target, he positions himself in their path and jigs a $\frac{3}{4}$ -ounce Hopkins spoon beneath the boat as the school passes.

Although surface-feeding fish can be picked off on top with a Rat-L-Trap, Onley usually finds the bigger fish on the bottom, where he snaps his spoon with a flick of the wrist. ■

SANTEE STRINGER ➤

SANTEE STRINGER

Terry Madewell

Early in December, Kevin Davis looks for schools of stripers feeding at the surface for the best action.



BIG MONTH FOR BIG FISH

DECEMBER BRINGS OUT THE BEST IN SANTEE'S STRIPERS, CATFISH, BASS

Terry Madewell

Important fishing decisions this month on the Santee Cooper lakes are less about whether the fishing action is good, but selecting which of the highly productive opportunities you'll most enjoy.

Trophy catfish, big stripers and chunky largemouth are all excellent choices, and the common denominator to making good catches is to follow the forage.

SIZZLING STRIPERS

The striper action continues to be outstanding in December, and the schooling action is often explosive.

Kevin Davis, owner of Blacks Camp on the Diversion Canal between Lake Moultrie and Lake Marion, said striper action is hot, with much of the action still on topwater.

"December typically produces some of the most-consistent striper action of the year," he said. "Early morning and late evening are typically best, but it's not unusual to find topwater action any

time of the day. When we have cloudy weather, the topwater action can be sizzling hot."

Davis (843-312-3080) said multiple lures work well on schooling stripers, including topwater lures, white bucktails, spoons of various varieties and swimming minnow lures. He recommends using different lures until you hit the best pattern.

"One of my favorite lures is the Striper Wacker, a custom-made bucktail and trailer developed by retired guide Frank Drose," Davis said.

"Drifting live bait is also highly productive when the fish are schooling, and down-lines fished at 10 to 12 feet deep and free-lines fished shallow behind the boat are excellent tactics."

Later in the month, stripers may get on a deeper pattern, and if menhaden flood into the lake, stripers will feed heavily on them.

"Fish live bait over the menhaden schools, and you'll likely catch both big stripers and catfish," Davis said.

BIG, DEEP CATFISH

December is consistently productive for quality and quantity catfish, and guide Charles "Capt. Kingfish" King said fishing deep water is important.

"Deep water is my key to big catfish during December," he said. "Both lakes are productive, but my preference is Lake Moultrie, because this lake has a lot of deep water. And by deep water, I mean fish may be as deep as 50 to 60 feet deep."

King (843-296-1083) said baitfish presence is a big factor when determining which deepwater area will produce the best action.

"Locating baitfish using your graph is important, because catfish are going to



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.

be around some sort of food. A lot of, but not all, shad are in deep water by December," he said. "My bait choices include cut herring, perch and mullet. Mullet is often my favorite during December; it can be found at bait shops around the lake."

King said drift-fishing is his preferred method in December, and he tries to keep his drift speed at around 0.5 miles per hour. He uses the standard Santee rig and varies the size of his bait daily to determine what the catfish prefer on that specific day.

"The weather can be cold and windy during December, but those are often great days to catch lots of fish," King said. "Be aware and prepare for those conditions when you go. That's why I have a fully enclosed section of my pontoon boat with a heater. The tough weather days can produce really productive fishing."

King said he rates the mid-November through December fishing as above average.

"November and December certainly are two of the best months to catch really big catfish," he said.

BUSTING BIG BASS

Bass fishing is excellent during December, and James Ramsey from North Charleston, S.C., said it's a great time to enjoy quality and quantity bass fishing.

"It's not unusual to find a localized hotspot and catch a bunch of bass in short order, but it's also an excellent time to hook a big fish," he said.

"Most of the bass I catch are taken in the 4- to 6-foot depth range," Ramsey said. "I've found they'll be found in clusters, and I may fish a stretch with little action, then find several in a localized area. The trick is to determine the productive pattern and then fish that pattern the rest of the day. But understand, the pattern will likely change by the following day as the forage moves.

"Crankbaits and swimbaits are excellent, especially shad-colored patterns," he said. "Slow-rolling spinnerbaits around woody cover is effective, and I love fishing plastic worms, but I downsize to short, 3- or 4-inch worms."

"Riprap areas are productive, but look for irregularities such as depth changes at the base of the rocks or where big rocks and smaller rocks merge as key factors," Ramsey said. "These small areas can hold multiple bass.

"Big bass are certainly in play," he said. "It's not like the spring, but they've been feasting on shad all fall and are typically fat and feisty." ■




James Ramsey said December is a great big-bass month on the Santee Cooper lakes.

Terry Madewell

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This speckled trout fell for a 3-inch Matrix Shad on a light jighead worked slowly along the grass by Ronnie Daniels.

Brian Cope

DECEMBER: SLOW, SMALL

INSHORE FISH ARE GETTING LETHARGIC; MATCH YOUR PRESENTATION

December is a great month for inshore fishing, but it does require some adjustments from anglers. Redfish and speckled trout both slow down considerably this month, but they'll still bite properly presented lures.

As cold water slows the activity levels of these fish, their appetites become smaller, so it's a good idea to scale down on lure sizes. Instead of casting 3½- and 4-inch long swimbaits, smaller lures like a 3-inch Matrix Shad or the 2½-inch Z-Man Slim SwimZ on jigheads are good choices.

These smaller lures can draw strikes when bigger lures presented in the same

areas go untouched. This goes against the natural inclination to cast bigger lures that would seemingly fill a fish up with one bite, and also to cast a bigger lure that is more noticeable to lethargic fish.

But the fish don't need help seeing the bait. They have no choice but to find food to survive, and they are very good at the task. However, they can be extra picky this month. One reason is because of their smaller appetites in cold weather. Another is because the water is generally very clear this time of year, which means the fish can see subtle imperfections in lures that can make them wary.

The smaller the lures, the less chance of

the fish spotting those unnatural-looking details. That, along with their affinity for snack-sized portions during winter will more often than not lead to more strikes.

FORGET THE SHADE

Through most of the year, inshore anglers work their lures at a moderate to fast pace. The more water they cover, the



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

more fish they put their lures in front of. But that's the wrong approach in December. Fish need to reserve their energy as much as possible right now, so they won't exert too much of it chasing baitfish or artificial lures. Use a slow retrieve this time of year.

During spring, summer, and even late into fall, anglers are accustomed to looking in shady spots or deeper holes for inshore fish. That's especially true in the Carolinas where the temperatures push fish to find the coolest water possible. But it's the opposite this time of year.

Especially early in the morning, inshore fish will seek the warmest areas they can find, and that usually means they'll be hanging out where the sun is shining brightest.

Shallow mud flats warm up quickly in winter when the sun is out. Redfish and specks will flock to those areas to warm up and to find baitfish, which are also seeking the warmth of the sun.

DON'T FORGET BAIT

Natural bait should also be an option for anglers this month. The scent of a tiny piece of shrimp placed on the hook with a swimbait can add just enough scent to entice a wary fish into biting. But it's also a good time to throw chunks of cut bait on a Carolina rig. These chunks give off strong scent, and anglers can allow them to sit still until a fish picks the bait up.

Many anglers find live bait works better than anything for them during cold weather. Fewer baitfish are inshore right now, but that doesn't mean redfish and trout won't eat ones they see. These fish find it hard to pass up a fresh mud minnow or mullet under a cork, especially when the angler casts it near a sunny area, then allows it to move about completely on its own. This isn't the time to pop and reel like anglers often do from the spring until late fall. An occasional pop might be good to draw attention, but a baitfish moving too much and too quickly is far more likely to be ignored by reds and trout this month.

BREAK THE RULES

These are good guidelines to follow for fishing in cold weather, but it's always a good idea to spend a little bit of time breaking the rules. A walk-the-dog topwater lure retrieved quickly across the surface may not draw as many bites as during other months, but it can still trigger an explosive strike from an aggressive fish on some days. Expect the bites to be much fewer, but definitely worth taking the chance on.

Far fewer anglers are on the water this month, giving diehards some of the most peaceful fishing of the year. The fish may seem less cooperative, but with these tips in mind, anglers can catch more than enough to make the day a success. ■

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December bass fishing is a matter of dressing for the elements and finding baitfish and bass that are hanging around them, waiting for the dinner bell to ring.

Dan Kibler

CATCH MOVING TARGETS

BASS ARE CHANGING PATTERNS IN DECEMBER, BUT THEY WON'T LEAVE BAIT

December is a transition month for bass in most of our lakes across the Carolinas, a time when fish are moving out of creeks and back to the main lake, and when they're following baitfish back out to the deeper water where they'll spend the winter.

I love to fish topwater in September and October, and even into November, but in December, I move away from that because bass aren't going to be near the surface nearly as much. But they're still bait-oriented, so they'll be around blue-back herring, threadfin shad and gizzard shad, the three main baitfish in our lakes. If you keep up with where the baitfish are, you'll never be too far from bass.

Before we had the great marine electronics we have now, we used to always follow the birds, the seagulls, to find the bait. Our electronics are so good now, you can use them to make sure you're around bait. When you find it, pay close attention to where it is in the water

column. You might find bait 10 feet deep over 30 feet of water, or the bait might be right on the bottom or just off the bottom. It's very, very important to know where they are in relation to the bottom.

TWO-LURE ATTACK

When I find bass and bait in this kind of situation, I like to fish a couple of different things. I want to fish a swimbait, a 3- or 4-inch Storm Largo Shad, rigged on a VMC swimbait jig, which has a round head and a screw-lock. It will hold the plastic really well; you'll use about one-third of the plastics with the screw lock as you would without it. My other bait is a soft-plastic jerkbait, a Gamaktsu

D Shad. I'll fish it on a VMC underspin jig head. And you can't go wrong with pearl or Tennessee shad colors, but I like a little chartreuse this time of year, like a Sexy Shad color, because the water will usually have a little bit of stain.

The size of the jighead you use will depend on how deep the bait is holding. If the bait is still back in a creek, maybe 6 or 8 feet deep, I'll use a 3/16-ounce head. If the bait is 15 feet deep over 30 feet of water, I'm going to use a 3/8-ounce head, because the bigger size will let you get the bait down to the fish faster.

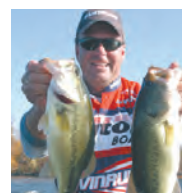


VMC underspin jig



Yamamoto D Shad

Storm Largo Shad



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

I like to fish these baits on a 6½- or 7-foot baitcasting outfit spooled with 12-pound Suffix.

Normally, I'm going to fish the underspin when the bait and bass are closer to the bottom; that's usually later in December when the water is colder. You can make really long casts with it and just crawl it across the bottom. That's how Casey Ashley won the Bassmaster Classic on Lake Hartwell a few years ago, crawling a swimbait on an underspin through the bass.

THE COUNTDOWN

Now, getting your bait in a bass's strike zone is much easier than it used to be. The old-school way was to count the bait down a foot per second as it sank. Obviously, a ¾-ounce jig isn't going to fall as fast as a ⅜-ounce jig, but that's all we had. The cool thing is now, our electronics are so good, you can drop a bait down below your transducer and see it on sonars like the Humminbird 2D I use, and electronics have come so far, you can see a ¼-ounce jig falling. You count while you watch it fall to the depth you want to fish, you figure out the count, and once you see how long it takes to fall, you shouldn't have to look at the sonar again; you can count it down accurately.

Most of the newer electronics have forward-facing transducers, and you can see 30 or 40 feet in front of your boat. You can cast a jig in front of the boat and watch it fall that way. If you can't, you can just drop it down under the transducer and count it down.

Usually, when I find the bait and bass suspended, I like to just let the bait fall to the depth I want it and just swim it back through them using a steady retrieve. If that doesn't work, I'll use a stop-and-go retrieve, maybe also lifting the bait up with my rod tip. It used to be a bit of a guessing game, but now you know you're around fish. The big puzzle for so many years was, were you using the right bait, and were you around fish? Now, with our electronics, you can know you're around fish.

ONE-DAY PATTERNS

Normally, when I'm fishing like this, I like colder water. I think it puts the bait closer to the bottom and schooled up tighter. I don't go looking all around, but if I find a place in the area I'm fishing with water that's a degree or two colder, that's what I'm looking for. Fish will stay active until the water temperature drops down into the mid-40s; that's when I'll start looking for warmer water. Also, don't be upset if you don't kill 'em right off the bat. A lot of times, the better bite may be later in the day, especially if you get a high-pressure day.

The weather also plays a big part in how you change up from day to day. You can pattern bass when you get on them like this. If you find them suspended 15 feet deep over 30 feet of water one day, you'll find them in different places just like that. But you can't fish one day and come back the next weekend and find them in the same depth. They will vary from day to day because of the amount of sunlight you get and the barometric pressure, things that affect fish behavior. ■

HUNTING SEASONS

DEER

Western	Bowhunting	Sept. 11-Oct. 3 Oct. 17-Nov. 21 Dec. 12-Jan. 1, 2022 (bucks only)
	Muzzleloader	Oct. 4-16
	Gun	Nov. 22-Dec. 11
Northwestern	Bowhunting	Sept. 11-Nov. 5
	Muzzleloader	Nov. 6-19
	Gun	Nov. 20-Jan. 1, 2022
Central	Bowhunting	Sept. 11-Oct. 29
	Muzzleloader	Oct. 30-Nov. 12
	Gun	Nov. 13-Jan. 1, 2022
Northeastern/ Southeastern	Bowhunting	Sept. 11-Oct. 1
	Muzzleloader	Oct. 2-15
	Gun	Oct. 16-Jan. 1, 2022

BEAR

Oct. 18-Nov. 20 & Dec. 13-Jan. 1, 2022:	In and west of Surry, Wilkes, Caldwell, Burke and Cleveland counties
Nov. 13-Jan. 1, 2022:	Alamance, Anson, Cabarrus, Caswell, Chatham, Davidson, Durham, Granville, Guilford, Lee, Mecklenburg, Montgomery, Orange, Person, Randolph, Rockingham, Rowan, Stanly, Union counties
Oct. 16-Jan. 1, 2022:	Franklin, Harnett, Hoke, Johnston, Moore, Richmond, Scotland, Vance, Warren, Wake counties
Nov. 20-Jan. 1, 2022:	Alexander, Catawba, Davie, Forsyth, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Stokes, Yadkin counties
Nov. 8-Jan. 1, 2022:	Bladen, Brunswick, Carteret, Columbus, Cumberland, Duplin, New Hanover, Onslow, Pamlico, Pender, Robeson, Sampson counties
Nov. 13-28, Dec. 11-26:	Dare, Hyde, Tyrrell counties
Nov. 13-21, Dec. 11-26:	Beaufort, Bertie, Craven, Hertford, Jones, Martin, Washington counties
Nov. 13-21 Dec. 12-27:	Camden*, Chowan*, Currituck Gates, Pasquotank*, Perquimans (*Seasons open Nov. 12 by local laws)
Nov. 20-Dec. 19:	Edgecombe, Greene, Halifax, Lenoir, Nash, Northampton, Pitt, Wayne, Wilson counties

SQUIRREL

Oct. 18-Feb. 28, 2022 (gray & red)
Oct. 18-Jan. 31, 2022 (fox)

RABBIT

Oct. 18-Feb. 28, 2022

RACCOON, OPOSSUM

Oct. 18-Feb. 28, 2022

QUAIL

Nov. 20-Feb. 28, 2022

GROUSE

Oct. 18-Feb. 28, 2022

RAILS

Sept. 4-14, Oct. 2-Dec. 1

COMMON SNIPE

Oct. 27-Feb. 28, 2022

CANADA GEESE

Resident zone, Oct. 21-30, Nov. 6-29,
Dec. 18-Feb. 12, 2022

Statewide: Sept. 1-30; NE Zone, Jan. 15-31, 2022 permit

SNOW, BLUE, ROSS GEESE

Oct. 12-Feb. 12, 2022, Feb. 14-March 31, 2022, permit

DUCKS

(Inland Zone)

Oct. 21-23, Nov. 6-27, Dec. 18-Jan. 31, 2022

(Coastal Zone)

Oct. 29-30, Nov. 6-29, Dec. 19-Jan. 31, 2022

EARLY TEAL

Sept. 11-29 (east of US 17 only)

SEA DUCKS

Nov. 23-Jan. 31, 2022

BRANT

Dec. 18-Jan. 31, 2022

DOVE

Sept. 4-Oct. 2, Nov. 6-27, Dec. 9-Jan. 31, 2022

TUNDRA SWAN

Nov. 6-Jan. 31, 2021. Bag limit 1, by permit only.

WOODCOCK

Dec. 10-Jan. 31, 2022

WILD TURKEY (Youth)

April 2-8, 2022

April 9-May 7, 2022

COOKING ON THE WILD SIDE

Jerry Dilsaver

SHRIMP, SAUSAGE TATER TOT BALLS

THIS RECIPE WILL BE A HIT AT HOLIDAY PARTIES OF ALL KINDS

It's been a crazy year, and I'm glad to finally be offering a recipe for December, for those Christmas parties, family get-togethers, gatherings for sporting events, tailgating and just about anything else where the invitation includes instructions on bringing a snack.

In past years, many of these recipes have involved fish, shrimp, bacon and/or sausage. This recipe also includes another thing I like, which is tater tots — but I bake them instead of frying them.

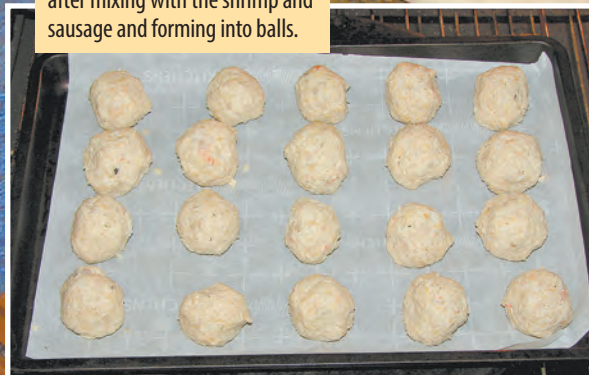
The name of this recipe, SST balls, comes from the ingredients, but they're a mouthful to say. SST is short for shrimp, sausage and tater tots. Settle in and you'll see how easily this treat is made. This is even better if it's made with shrimp and sausage you provided. There is something special about it when you supply the fresh ingredients.

One other thing regular readers will know is that I like foods with a little character and robust flavor. This is a treat that really lends itself well to preparing for everyone to enjoy. It can be made with mild- or medium-flavored sausage; the only other spice added is freshly ground black pepper. This allows folks with milder palates to enjoy it, too.

For those folks that enjoy more robust spices, I'll suggest several dipping sauces. The recipe includes a simple sauce made by mixing a little Texas Pete Cha Sauce with mayonnaise and suggests sweet chili sauce, chipotle ranch and ranch dressing for those that prefer a different taste.

If you make this with wild-game sausage, please label it as such. I believe including game in treats like this is an excellent way of introducing new people to it, but be up front about the contents and do not surprise people with the ingredients after they taste it. Do not badger people to try game recipes either. Tell them what it is, explain that it is lean and healthy and let them decide for themselves. If they won't try it or don't like it, then there is more for those of us who do. ■

Tater tots are the ingredient that really sets off these snack balls made with shrimp and sausage. Shred the tots and bake them after mixing with the shrimp and sausage and forming into balls.



S.S.T. BALLS

This is another of my “how about” recipes that is simple; most folks will enjoy it. This is a treat that folks don’t leave the last one to be polite, but someone gladly eats it, too.

The idea came about while eating kipper snacks with hot sauce and saltines while fishing. A lot of shrimp were rolling out a creek mouth, and it began with a comment like, “We ought to catch a bunch of those shrimp and eat them instead of this.”

The brainstorming started and included several good and several ridiculous ideas. It was on my mind when I got home and I began tinkering in the kitchen. The process flowed, and I added the sausage and tater tots, while my wife suggested cream cheese to bind it together. I continue to experiment and have added chopped jalapenos, cheese and several options. Some have worked out pretty well and some not so well. This recipe is basic and, as I suggest so often, experiment with it on your own.

Shrimp are the prime ingredient. I would use smaller shrimp. I think they are a little more tender and are definitely easier to mince. However, don’t overlook larger shrimp; they taste fine, too.

Many folks will make this with domestic sausage, and that’s fine. It’s certainly easier to get. I prefer to make it with feral pork or venison sausage that was blended to my preference.

The recipe makes well and tastes fine using domestic sausage, but you must use a premium brand, not the store special, which will be greasier; it’s tough to get all the excess grease out, even pressed between layers of paper towels. Visit a butcher shop or farm store and use one of their premium sausage blends.

I haven’t discovered much difference in tater tots. I simply want tots that use pieces of diced potatoes. It seems minor, but it makes a difference to allow the tater tots to thaw completely before being shredded and mixed.

I have made this using cream cheese right from the refrigerator

and with it defrosted. I haven’t noticed a difference in taste, but believe I like the consistency of the balls better with it right out of the fridge, even though it’s easier to blend in when defrosted. Cutting the cream cheese into small pieces makes it easier to mix in.

Only sizzle the sausage on medium until it begins to change color. It will cook the rest of the way in the oven. Remove the sausage without removing the drippings. Drop the diced shrimp into this for a short time (30 seconds or so) to add some flavor. Stir it the whole time so it doesn’t stick or burn and also remove it without removing the drippings.

I bake the balls, but folks who prefer frying will find them to be excellent fried. I believe a deep fryer will be best for frying, but the balls could be flattened and cooked in a shallow frying pan.

This recipe was intended from the beginning to be an appetizer or hors d’oeuvre. Adding dipping sauces in vary degrees of spice makes it tasty for everyone. I added the simple dipping sauce that mixes Texas Pete Cha Sauce with mayonnaise. I suggest Texas Pete for this as it has a smoky, sweet taste that isn’t overly hot. Try any of your favorites too. Give this a try and I believe you’ll try it again. Enjoy! ■

INGREDIENTS:

2/3 cup diced raw shrimp,
1/3 cup ground sausage — use mild or medium spicy

4 cups tater tots

8 oz. cream cheese

1/4 cup sweet onion, finely chopped

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Parchment paper

For dipping sauce:

1/2 cup mayonnaise

Texas Pete Cha Sauce to taste

PREPARATION

Thaw tater tots. Peel, de-vein and dice shrimp. Shred tater tots into a bowl. Lightly brown the sausage and remove to drain on paper towels. Leave the drippings in the pan. Drop shrimp pieces into sausage drippings and sauté, stirring constantly, for 30 seconds to a minute maximum, then remove.

Put tater tots, shrimp, sausage, onion and cream cheese into a large bowl and season with pepper (to taste). Thoroughly mix the ingredients. Preheat oven to 425.

Line a shallow baking pan with parchment paper. Roll the mixture into balls a little smaller than golf balls and place on the parchment paper in the baking pan. Bake the balls for approximately 16 to 20 minutes. Brown them lightly on top while not allowing them to burn on the bottom. Allow the balls to cool 5 to 10 minutes before serving.

Mix the mayonnaise and Cha Sauce. Use a cracker to taste it, and be sure it doesn’t get too spicy. When the sauce is light pink, it is mild, and as more Cha Sauce is added, it will become darker and spicier. Other dipping sauces that go with this well are sweet chili sauce, chipotle ranch dressing and ranch dressing. Don’t hesitate to try your favorite dipping sauce.

This is a tasty snack or appetizer for Christmas parties, gather-

ings of family and friends, Tailgating, watching sports events on TV and any other event where fun food is served. It is best when served warm, but tastes pretty good after cooling also. If you reheat the balls, it is better to spread them on a cookie sheet in the oven at about 250 for 15 minutes than to microwave them. ■



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



SPORTSMAN FISHING HOTSPOTS

BRUSHING UP ON KERR LAKE CRAPPIE

Winter crappie fishing at Kerr Lake can be very productive if you can find the right brush piles.

Brush piles in deep water produce plenty of winter crappie on sprawling lake

K By Tony Garitta
eith Wray of Fish Doc Guide Service spends more than 100 days a year on Kerr Lake fishing for crappie. Unless he's with clients, he sets aside an hour per trip searching for brush piles to add to his staggering number of potential crappie haunts.

Wray, who is from Eden, N.C., knows of more than 600 brush piles, stretching from Grassy Creek to Eastland Creek.

"I've put in a fair number of brush piles myself," said Wray (252-589-9025). "With side-scan units, finding brush planted by others isn't nearly the impossible task it once was, even on a 50,000-acre lake."

Wray said coveted brush piles are those composed of willow or sycamore that

extend from the bottom in 20 to 25 feet of water to top out 10 feet under the surface. They're located at steep drops and the edges of flats and points.

The preferred lake level for crappie fishing around brush in the winter is 296 feet above sea level, or about 5 feet below normal pool. A permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is required to plant brush. Clear water is also best.

Since winter drawdowns can exceed 5 feet, Wray's awareness of brush piles planted at various depths gives him plenty of alternatives.

COUNT, BACKWIND

To fish brush piles, Wray employs a casting/countdown method, a vertical

presentation or a backwinding technique, all involving light spinning tackle used in conjunction with 1/16- to 1/8-ounce jigs and 3/8-ounce Cotton Cordell C.C. spoons. His color choices for jigs include red/green/yellow and blue ice for clear water and green lime for dingy water; for spoons, silver for clear and gold for dingy water.

Wray uses 4-pound monofilament line to offset clear water and to retain the action of his small baits.

When countdown fishing, Wray determines the number of feet per second his jigs will fall, then counts down until they reach the depth where the crappie are holding. The slow, tantalizing drop catches sluggish, cold-water fish that won't chase baits. His vertical presentations with jigs or

MCLELLANVILLE TROUT, REDS ON FIRE

Cooler waters of December bring out the best in two favorite inshore targets

By Brian Cope

Anglers looking for a hot bite in December can find all they want in the waters around McClellanville, S.C.

Redfish and speckled trout are hungry this month, and guide Stephen Flook of Unashamed Adventures said this is one of his favorite months to fish here.

"The redfish and specks are biting artificial lures this month like no other," said Flook (864-430-88300). "It's one of the easiest times to catch them without using natural baits. And catching them this way is a lot like fishing for largemouth bass. It makes for a fun time on the water."

Flook's top choice for lures in December is a paddletail swimbait on a jighead.

"I use the Z-Man DieZel MinnowZ in the beer run color, mainly on a 3/8-ounce jighead," he said. "I'll catch both species on this lure, and redfish and sea trout are good, staple fish in this area throughout December and into January."

If specifically targeting specks, Flook will cast to slightly deeper holes in areas around oyster shell banks. He will scale down on his jighead size if conditions warrant. For water in the 5- to 6-foot range, he'll use a 1/4-ounce jighead. For water deeper, he'll go to the 3/8-ounce size.

"For the trout, I like the incoming tide a

little better," he said. "And I look for an oyster bar on a point and put my lure in deeper pockets right behind the oyster bar. The trout will sit in those holes. It may not be a huge depth change, but what I've found is the trout sit in those holes. I'll cast my lure upcurrent, let it sink, then work it through the hole."

On outgoing tides, Flook targets specks around creek mouths, casting into those mouths and working his lure as it runs out with the current.

"For redfish, I like to find shallow flats. This is where redfish love to hang out this time of year to keep safe from the dolphins. I find these flats by going out at dead-low tide and looking for the oyster bars that are totally exposed at low tide. As the tide comes in, the redfish will move up on those shallow flats," he said.

Other reasons Flook likes fishing this time of year include fewer boats are on the water, and the marsh's pretty brown color, which offers a change of scenery. Also, the weather is rarely uncomfortably cold, and fewer bugs are around.

"It's a great month for fishing here for a number of reasons. But mainly, it's just a much more-consistent bite on artificial lures than any other time," he said. ■

spoons puts the baits right in front of the fish, thanks to his electronics.

Wray doesn't let his baits free-fall, but follows them down with his rod tip and line to detect the slightest of strikes.

With the Cordell spoon, he employs backwinding. To backwind, Wray measures the amount of line his reel releases in one backward turn and calculating the distance from the rod tip to the spoon. Each backward turn of the reel releases the spoon the calculated distance. By slowly backwinding the spoon, he prevents free fall.

SPOON-FED

The spoon is used for catching crappie residing in deep brush.

"It seemingly takes forever for a light jig to fall 25 feet, so the heavier spoon gets down quicker, though I control its rate of descent by backwinding," said Wray, who avoids strong winds and current, if possible, to maintain control of his baits.

Wray said crappie become extremely tough to catch when water temperatures drop into the 40-degree range or lower.

While Kerr is excellent for numbers of crappie, it rarely produces 3-pound fish.

"It took me more than five years to catch my first 3-pound crappie," said Wray. "A 2-pound crappie is a state-citation fish." ■

Deeper holes around oyster shell banks produce plenty of December speckled trout in the waters around McClellanville, S.C.



Unashamed Adventures

Guide Daniel Skipper concentrates on bridge pilings for December crappie at Lake Greenwood.



BRIDGE THE SLAB GAP

Lake Greenwood's bridges produce limits

P By Pat Robertson
laying the bridge game is key to loading a stringer with crappie on Lake Greenwood once winter weather sends water temperatures on a downward trend, according to guide Daniel Skipper of Waterloo, S.C.

"The concrete in the bridge pilings warms up during the day when the sun is shining, and that warms the adjacent water, making it more attractive to the fish," Skipper said, adding that the bridge and pilings also provide shade, giving the fish some relief from the glare of the overhead sun. "Some fish will be up in the water column sunning, and some will be deeper."

Skipper said the best way to find what depth fish are holding is to mark concentrations of fish with his boat's electronics.

"You can catch them tight-lining minnows or jiggling Slabtail jigs vertically at the depths where the fish are located," said Skipper (864-430-0488). "I generally like the smaller minnows for bait, because it seems the bait they are feeding on in the winter is pretty small.

"I like a 1/16-ounce jig and sometimes, a 1/32-ounce jig. Sometimes, I'll also double-rig jigs."

Skipper said crappie seem to prefer a dark-colored jig tail in dark

or muddier water; on days when the sun is shining, a clear jig with glitter seems to work best.

Skipper said the crappie catch on Greenwood is variable. A 4-inch fish might be followed by a 2 1/2-pound slab.

"Some years, there will be a good hatch of crappie, and some years it might be slower, but usually you can catch a good mess of eating fish just about any time," Skipper said. "The minimum size limit is 8 inches, and the daily limit is 20 fish per person. On a good trip you can expect to catch from 25 to 40 fish.

"You just have to move around until you find where the big concentrations are located." ■



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.

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2021 DEC	BEST DAYS				VALUE
	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	EXCL	
Wed 1	█	█	█	█	34
Thu 2	█	█	█	█	42
Fri 3	█	█	█	█	51
Sat 4	█	█	█	█	54
Sun 5	█	█	█	█	42
Mon 6	█	█	█	█	31
Tue 7	█	█	█	█	21
Wed 8	█	█	█	█	17
Thu 9	█	█	█	█	24
Fri 10	█	█	█	█	36
Sat 11	█	█	█	█	27
Sun 12	█	█	█	█	23
Mon 13	█	█	█	█	25
Tue 14	█	█	█	█	27
Wed 15	█	█	█	█	39
Thu 16	█	█	█	█	50
Fri 17	█	█	█	█	60
Sat 18	█	█	█	█	65
Sun 19	█	█	█	█	56
Mon 20	█	█	█	█	47
Tue 21	█	█	█	█	38
Wed 22	█	█	█	█	33
Thu 23	█	█	█	█	32
Fri 24	█	█	█	█	31
Sat 25	█	█	█	█	34
Sun 26	█	█	█	█	42
Mon 27	█	█	█	█	30
Tue 28	█	█	█	█	23
Wed 29	█	█	█	█	22
Thu 30	█	█	█	█	20
Fri 31	█	█	█	█	39

25 50 75
AVERAGE

LUNAR PERIODS					TIMES OCCURRING AT NIGHT ARE SHADED	
MOON RISE	PRIMARY MOON OVERHEAD	MOON SET	PRIMARY MOON UNDERFOOT			
3:45 AM	8:44 am - 10:22 am	3:12 PM	9:09 pm - 10:47 pm	☉		
4:58 AM	9:48 am - 11:06 am	3:49 PM	10:13 pm - 11:31 pm	☉		
6:13 AM	10:55 am - 11:57 am	4:32 PM	11:20 pm - Midnight	☉		
7:30 AM	12:05 pm - 12:53 pm	5:25 PM	Midnight - 12:22 am	☉	NEW & PERISEE	
8:44 AM	1:12 pm - 1:58 pm	6:26 PM	12:30 am - 1:18 am	☉	Low	
9:50 AM	2:18 pm - 3:04 pm	7:35 PM	1:37 am - 2:23 am	☉		
10:45 AM	3:17 pm - 4:09 pm	8:46 PM	2:43 am - 3:29 am	☉		
11:30 AM	4:07 pm - 5:13 pm	9:56 PM	3:42 am - 4:34 am	☉		
12:07 PM	4:50 pm - 6:12 pm	11:03 PM	4:32 am - 5:38 am	☉		
12:38 PM	5:27 pm - 7:09 pm		5:15 am - 6:37 am	☉	Half	
1:06 PM	6:01 pm - 8:03 pm	12:06 AM	5:52 am - 7:34 am	☉		
1:32 PM	6:35 pm - 8:53 pm	1:06 AM	6:26 am - 8:28 am	☉		
1:57 PM	7:05 pm - 9:45 pm	2:04 AM	7:00 am - 9:18 am	☉		
2:23 PM	7:39 pm - 10:35 pm	3:01 AM	7:30 am - 10:10 am	☉		
2:52 PM	8:14 pm - 11:26 pm	3:59 AM	8:04 am - 11:00 am	☉		
3:23 PM	8:52 pm - 12:18 am	4:56 AM	8:39 am - 11:51 am	☉		
3:59 PM	9:35 pm - 1:11 am	5:55 AM	9:17 am - 12:43 pm	☉	Apogee	
4:40 PM	10:22 pm - 2:02 am	6:52 AM	10:00 am - 1:36 pm	☉	Full	
5:27 PM	11:12 pm - Midnight	7:47 AM	10:47 am - 2:27 pm	☉		
6:19 PM	Midnight - 2:54 am	8:39 AM	11:37 am - 3:19 pm	☉	High	
7:16 PM	12:04 am - 3:44 am	9:25 AM	12:29 pm - 4:09 pm	☉	Winter	
8:16 PM	12:58 am - 4:30 am	10:06 AM	1:23 pm - 4:55 pm	☉		
9:16 PM	1:51 am - 5:13 am	10:42 AM	2:16 pm - 5:38 pm	☉		
10:17 PM	2:46 am - 5:52 am	11:14 AM	3:11 pm - 6:17 pm	☉		
11:19 PM	3:40 am - 6:30 am	11:43 AM	4:05 pm - 6:55 pm	☉		
	4:33 am - 7:05 am	12:11 PM	4:58 pm - 7:30 pm	☉	Half	
12:22 AM	5:31 am - 7:39 am	12:39 PM	5:56 pm - 8:04 pm	☉		
1:26 AM	6:28 am - 8:16 am	1:09 PM	6:53 pm - 8:41 pm	☉		
2:34 AM	7:28 am - 8:56 am	1:42 PM	7:53 pm - 9:21 pm	☉		
3:46 AM	8:32 am - 9:40 am	2:20 PM	8:57 pm - 10:05 pm	☉		
5:00 AM	9:38 am - 10:34 am	3:06 PM	10:03 pm - 10:59 pm	☉		

ANY LUNAR PERIOD IS ENHANCED WHEN IT OVERLAPS A KEY SOLAR PERIOD. THE BEST OF THESE OVERLAPS ARE DESIGNATED BY THE SUN SYMBOLS:
☉ = DAWN ☉ = HIGH NOON ☉ = DUSK
WHILE THE LESSER MOONRISE AND SET OVERLAPS (ABOUT 30 MIN. BEFORE AND AFTER THE LISTED TIME) ARE DESIGNATED BY BOLD BLACK TYPE.

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NEUSE RIVER SPECKS CALL NEW BERN HOME

High-salinity water has kept winter trout from big downstream move to sound

S By Craig Holt
potted seatrout moved upstream in the Neuse River system during September and October, according to guide Ashley King of New Bern, N.C. — and they've never left.

After a mild summer and fall with few major rain events, high-salinity water has remained in the upper reaches of the river, and instead of moving back to the mouth of the river where it enters the Pamlico Sound, they've stayed put.

That, combined with a lack of cold-weather fish kills the past several years, should lead to a great December of fishing, King said.

"Trout are in places in the Neuse they usually don't reach until late November and December," said King, of Keep Casting Charters. "Everyone knows specks already are at the (railroad) trestle and the bridges."

King opens his fishing trips by trolling MirrOlure Heavy Dine twitchbaits and XI Soft Dines near the bridge pilings and along river ledges after the water temperature drops to the mid-to-low 50s.

"I also troll an 18-MR 808 with a black back, orange belly and flashing (sides)," he said. "I also like X-Raps."

When he's casting and cranking, he'll fish the same lures for trout that have moved to the backs of feeder creeks, plus Z-Man and Little John grubs on jigheads.

"Winter trout relate more to ledges than structures," King said, "and there's more baitfish at the backs of creeks when it gets cold."

"I position my boat so I can throw lures at the tops of ledges and work them down," said King, who fishes Shimano Stradic 3000 reels spooled with 10-pound braid and short, 15-pound fluorocarbon leaders on 7-foot, medium-light TFO rods.

"Any color with gold is a good lure, along with baby bass color," said King, who uses bright colors like pink and golden bream in clear water, plus one other lure, "one specialty lure I call a

Need More. "It's a dark-red, root beer color with a chartreuse tail."

King prefers 1/8- to 3/16-ounce Z-Man Trout Eye jigheads or Blue Water Candy jigheads because of their slow fall. He'll go to a 3/8-ounce jig in strong winds or currents.

Neuse River trout typically range from 16 to 20 inches in the winter. The daily creel for spotted seatrout is four fish at least 14 inches long.

"You're also liable to hook up with a striper in December," King said. ■

BELOW: Speckled trout haven't moved back down the river toward the Pamlico Sound this fall because of high-salinity water in the New Bern area.





MURRELLS INLET'S TRIPLE PLAY

Specks, reds, black drum all have shrimp on December menus

Speckled trout have far fewer competitors for shrimp once bait-stealers leave Murrells Inlet's estuary when water temperatures drop.

As By Jeff Burleson
the end of the year approaches, winter sets in across the Carolinas, and another transition period occurs for anglers. While some transitions can be traumatic, the December transition can be one to be longed-for in the waters around South Carolina's Murrells Inlet.

Inshore anglers with a taste for redfish, speckled trout and black drum, can't pick any other time of year when they can float a live shrimp and land three prime species without pulling in the anchor.

Murrells Inlet may be a small estuary compared to many of the neighboring lagoons to the south, but the fishing is not small by any means, and it can easily produce record days with a mixed bag of specks, reds, and black drum. As the winter approaches and cold weather sets in, the inshore fishing can be about as good as it gets in this pint-sized estuary.

Dan Connelly of O-Fish-AI Expeditions, one of the top inshore guides in the Murrells Inlet area, said December is one of his favored months to float live shrimp down a creek bank.

"December is prime time to catch trout, black drum and redfish in the same places," said Connelly (843-241-7022). "All three species tolerate cold water, and the bait stealers are on vacation."

The inshore waters are nursery grounds for a wide variety of finfish that love shrimp of any kind: dead, alive or cut up. Smaller predators will attack like a school of piranhas with blood in the water. Some of the largest culprits among these "pickers" are pinfish, but when the water temperature plummets, they evacuate the estuary.

"The trash fish, especially the pinfish, leave when the water

temperatures drop into the 50s," Connelly said. "When water temperatures remain in the 50s, the preferred gamefish school up and can be easier to catch on live shrimp."

Everything eats shrimp, and a kicking, energetic live shrimp suspended in the water column is too much to take for a trout, red or black drum. Luckily, the best places to target these fish are in the main and feeder creeks of the estuary.

Murrells Inlet has a large network of creeks lined with oysters and plenty of docks around the island and mainland margins. Connelly will patrol these places, looking to find a hungry school of gamefish.

Reds and black drum will typically be in different places along the creeks as the trout.

"Black drum and reds will be closer to the bank and typically in shallower water, feeding along the oysters and grass edges," Connelly said. "Trout will be in the same area but a little bit deeper, hanging just off the drops in 4 to 12 feet. They all are generally within casting distance in our smaller creeks."

Connelly prefers to rig his live shrimp under an adjustable float so he can quickly target the shallow margins along grass edges and then, with a quick adjustment, he can suspend his shrimp over a dropoff for a gator trout.

December can be an interesting time for Carolina anglers, but the inshore trio can be explosive this time of year with live shrimp. And the Murrells Inlet estuary maybe arguably one of the best places to consistently put these favored fish in the boat from the same vantage points. ■

BOTTOMFISH THROUG TO CAPE FEAR AREA'S OFFSHORE STRUCTURE

D By Jerry Dilsaver
December's weather off the coast of southeastern North Carolina is rarely nasty, and is a good time to head offshore to fill the cooler with a variety of deep-water bottomfish.

There is a surprising amount of bottom structure, plus numerous shipwrecks, off Cape Fear, and they hold a variety of grouper, snapper, grunts, porgys, black sea bass and more. All taste good and freeze well, and December is a great time to head offshore and stock up. Seasons for several grouper species will close for several months on Jan. 1, so it's the last opportunity for a while to keep any of them.

Rod Bierstedt of On My Way Charters in Wilmington, N.C., said this is a great time to fish offshore. The fish, which usually bite well anyway, are fired up by the cooling water, and catching a limit is simply a matter of getting properly positioned over structure holding fish.

Bierstedt (910-352-2719) likes catching grouper and snapper as much as anyone, but he points out there is a huge reef complex of porgys, grunts and others with a liberal 20-fish limit, plus black sea bass and more good-tasting species, especially on cold windy days in January and February.

"I have anchored on productive structure for years, but I will soon be adding a spot-lock trolling motor to make staying in position easier," Bierstedt said. "Once in place, I give a ledge 30 minutes or so to get the fish fired up and biting. You can catch fish while drifting, but you keep drifting away from the fish that just got interested and started biting.

"I use a bait combination we used to use fishing commercially, and the fish like it," Bierstedt said. "I begin with a Spanish sardine hooked through the eyes and add a fillet from a tomtate or redmouth grunt slipped on the hook upside down. The fillet moves a bit in the current, and the smaller fish attack it and tear it apart, but they don't mess with the sardine. When their frenzied activity gets the attention of a big fish, there's still bait when it swims over to see what is happening.

Bierstedt recommends using 130-pound braid to eliminate stretch when trying to hoist big fish out the rocks 100 or more feet below. He said the first 30 feet is critical, and monofilament has too much stretch. He uses 150-pound mono to make a combination of single- and double-drop rigs that end in circle hooks.

Bierstedt fishes 5-foot-8 Ugly Stik XH Jigging rods fitted with Penn 4/0 Senator and Shimano Torium TG reels in the 20 and 30 sizes. He said they have the right combination of sensitivity to feel subtle bites and power to wrestle big fish off the bottom quickly. ■

Grouper and a handful of other tasty bottomfish are on the feed in December.



“ I have anchored on productive structure for years, but I will soon be adding a spot-lock trolling motor to make staying in position easier. **”**

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