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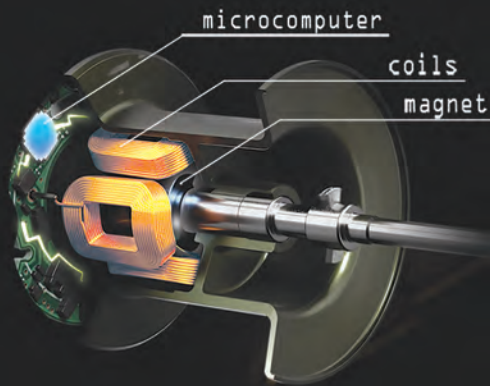


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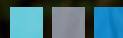
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Monday thru Friday, 6 am to 11 pm
Saturday & Sunday, 8 am - 5 pm CST

LOUISIANA SPORTSMAN (USPS665390) is published monthly by Louisiana Publishing, Inc., Allen J. Lottinger, President, 14236 Highway 90, P.O. Box 1199, Boutte, LA 70039. Mailed at periodicals postage rates and paid at Baton Rouge, La., and additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to Louisiana Sportsman, P.O. Box 433294, Palm Coast, FL 32143. All rights reserved. Reproduction of contents is strictly prohibited without permission of Louisiana Sportsman. **EDITORIAL:** Louisiana Sportsman uses free-lance writers throughout the state. Call (985) 758-7217 for information on submitting articles and photos. Louisiana Sportsman is not responsible for the loss of queries, manuscripts or other materials.

P.O. Box 1199, Boutte, LA 70039-1199
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Johnny Watkins, a fire captain from Lake Charles, has been fishing Lacassine Pool since he was a teenager and has fond memories of sleeping while waiting in line for the refuge gates to swing open on the first day of the season.

ON THE COVER:



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Clint Wade poses with the 10.84-pound lunker largemouth he reeled in on Saturday, Jan. 12 during a CAST tournament on Toledo Bend. His girlfriend, Stacy Spriggs, holds the other four fish that completed their winning five-fish stringer for the tournament.

Photo courtesy of Clint Wade

TOLEDO'S TEXAS SIDE YIELDS 10+ POUND LUNKER IN THE 12-15 AREA

Wade's big bass bit a 1/2-ounce citrus V&M swim jig By Patrick Bonin

When you're in a tournament and the first fish of the day pushes 11 pounds, it's probably a pretty good omen.

That's exactly what happened to Clint Wade and his girlfriend, Stacy Spriggs, during a Couples Association of Sport Tournaments (CAST) event held Jan. 12 out of Holly Park Marina on the Texas side at Toledo Bend.

Wade and Spriggs launched out of

Pendleton Harbor and were in the 12-15 area on a chilly morning with an air temperature of 45 degrees and a water temp in the low 50s when he felt a solid bite.

"I was sitting in a drain at 11 or 12 feet, throwing up to 7 or 8 feet with a citrus V&M swim jig, slow-rolling it back, bouncing it off the bottom," said Wade, 43, of Huntsville, Texas, who was fishing with a Falcon Amistad rod and a Daiwa Tatula SV reel spooled with 15-pound Seaguar

InvizX fluorocarbon. "I knew it was a big fish when I set the hook on her, but I didn't know that she was that big.

"Even when she came to the top and we got her in the net, I thought she was an 8-pound fish."

But Wade got a closer look at the bass as Stacy weighed it before putting it in the livewell.

>

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"When I turned and looked at her on the deck, that's when I saw how wide the fish was, because the belly was toward me," he said. "That fish was 3 inches wide. And about the time I realized she was a pretty good fish, Stacy's eyes got big and she said, 'It's over 10!'"

They continued fishing with the lunker comfortably in the livewell, and caught six more fish before lunchtime, mostly on a chartreuse/white ¾-ounce Stanley spinnerbait.

The big bass was weighed-in at Keith's Toledo Bend Tackle, where it tipped certified scales at 10.84 pounds, with a length of 25¼ inches and a girth of 19 inches.

Wade's fish was the 17th bass weighing 10 pounds or better entered this season into the Toledo Bend Lunker Bass Program, which awards anglers a complimentary mount for returning big fish back to Toledo Bend waters alive.

It was Wade's biggest bass ever, and second Lunker Program entry: He caught a 10.32-pounder on Jan. 5, 2014.

The lunker easily won Big Bass for the tournament, and propelled Wade and Spriggs to first place in the CAST event, with a five-fish stringer that tipped the scales at 22.95 pounds.

It might not have been the most exciting battle with a fish Wade has ever had, but he'll take it.

"Wintertime fish are a lot different. They don't fight near as hard as summertime fish," said Wade, who owns Outlaw Outdoors with his girlfriend and promotes bass fishing tournaments on Lake Sam Rayburn. "Big fish are kind of like fighting a 70-year-old man. They just don't have the oomph a 30-year-old has." ■



Hunter Hanks downed this nice Lincoln Parish 11-pointer on Nov. 21, about two weeks after he shot a nice 8 from the identical stand. The two deer combined totaled about 300 inches of bone.

TWO BIG BUCKS TAKEN 15 DAYS APART FROM SAME STAND

By Glynn Harris

HANKS' BUCKS TOTAL 300 INCHES OF ANTLER

If you don't think stand placement is important, consider the fact that Hunter Hanks downed two trophy bucks — a 145-inch 8-point and a 155-inch 11-point — from the same old lean-to stand in Lincoln Parish just 15 days apart last fall.

"I had been hunting on another tract of family land but decided to put out a trail camera just to see what might be hanging around a 40-acre plot," said Hanks, 23. "My dad had put up a lean-to stand on the plot several years ago, but nobody ever hunted it. It was the only stand on the property, but it was situated in a good spot — sitting on one ridge loaded with white oaks and (allowing) you to see another similar ridge."

Hanks set up a single trail camera around the white oaks and got two photos of two big bucks together, one carrying an 8-point rack and the other sporting 11 points. That was enough for him to decide to hunt the old, lean-to stand.

"On the morning of Nov. 6, I was sitting on the stand when I heard a deer walking. It stepped out and I recognized it as one of the bucks. I put the scope on my .444 on him,

hit the trigger, and he dropped on the spot," he said. "It was the 8-point which was later scored at 145 inches."

Fast forward to Nov. 21, when Hanks once again slipped into the woods and climbed into the old lean-to stand.

At 8:15 on a foggy morning, a doe appeared, and then Hanks heard another deer and eventually made out its feet and a big, white rack of horns. He found a space to shoot through, but his first shot hit limb and glanced away harmlessly.

He searched around in his jacket pocket for his only remaining pocket, sending change clattering down the steps of the ladder, but the deer didn't spook. He reloaded and fired.

The buck left, but eventually, Hanks and his father followed a trail for 60 yards and found the 11-pointer piled up against a white oak. It carried a 17¾-inch inside spread, had 5-inch bases and main beams 24 inches each. The tallest tines approached 15 inches, and he measured 155⅜ inches of bone. ■

Read more of this story at Louisianasportsman.com/bigbucks.

Dillon Savoy, of St. Amant, poses with the big 15-point Iberville Parish buck he shot on Jan. 17 at the White Castle Hunting Club. The 6½-year-old deer got within 10 yards of Savoy on a swamp levee before he dropped it with buckshot.



Photo courtesy of Dillon Savoy

WHITE CASTLE 15-Pointer SHOT ON THE LEVEE

By Patrick Bonin

BUCK, MEASURING 163 INCHES,
MAKES FATAL MISTAKE ON JAN. 17

Dillon Savoy and his wife, Rebecca, were expecting their second child — a girl — on Feb. 4, so Savoy, a 27-year-old St. Amant resident, knew that a hunt he and his dad scheduled for Jan. 17 would be his last chance to take a deer this season.

Savoy hunts on 14,000 acres at White Castle Hunting Club in Iberville Parish, and he had his sights set on a nice 10-pointer that was ultimately taken by another hunter. That forced him to explore some different options on a scouting trip to the White Castle Canal spoil bank earlier in January.

"I decided to hunt the levee, because nobody goes out there. I was trying to get away from people," said Savoy. "Except for that spoil bank, it's all swamp, full of palmettos up and down the levee. I saw a lot of good sign: pawings, hookings on trees and trails on the levee."

So he and his dad, Lane, headed out on a rainy Jan. 17 morning. That rainy Thursday morning in his Gator Tail, Savoy parked the boat and started making his way up the spoil bank, while his dad headed down the canal in a pirogue to hunt a different spot.

Savoy wanted to ease along the levee with a folding chair and his Browning A-5 shotgun. He set up on a spoil bank alongside some palmettos.

"I felt like I kept on hearing something in the water, and it sounded like deer, but there were coons, otters and minks making noise out there," he said. "Then I heard it again, and I knew it was definitely a deer."

A doe popped out about 25 yards away, walked a few feet, and a buck appeared behind her, grunting. At 20 yards, with the buck closing the distance rapidly.

At that point, the buck was less than

10 yards away from Savoy, who stayed focused on the big deer and its giant rack.

"I just threw up like I was on a duck hunt and shot," he said. "As soon as I broke to throw my gun up, he went to take off, too. I saw his butt drop, and he was taking off!"

But the buck never knew what hit it: A close-range buckshot blast to the neck sent the big deer toppling off the spoil bank into the swamp on the other side.

The 15-point buck was scored by a biologist with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries at 163½ inches gross. The 6½-year-old deer had an inside spread of 18½ inches with 4½ bases, but was rutted down and weighed only 150 pounds.

"I was shook up," Savoy said. "My dad was just tickled to tears. I was definitely glad he was there to share it with me." ■

Read more of this story at Louisianasportsman.com/bigbucks.

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Benji Nelson, of Sicily Island, poses with the big 12-point he shot near Sicily Island on Dec. 29, 2018. The 6 ½-year-old deer green-scored more than 173 inches of bone, Nelson's biggest buck ever.



SICILY ISLAND PRODUCES 170-CLASS GIANT

By Patrick Bonin

HUNTER GAMBLES WITH RISKY SHOT
AND WINDS UP WITH HUGE TROPHY

Photo courtesy of Benji Nelson

Late in December, Benji Nelson knew time was getting short to kill a wily old buck he and his family had been hunting for three years in Catahoula Parish.

The elusive 6½-year-old deer had only been photographed at night by multiple landowners in an area near J.C. “Sonny” Gilbert Wildlife Management Area, and Nelson, a 38-year-old Sicily Island resident, was starting to wonder if anyone would ever take it down.

“I told my daddy the day before, ‘That deer is going to die of old age,’” said Nelson. “But if he’s going to be killed, it will be in the next week — and I’m going to be there to try to get him.”

“And I’ll be danged if I didn’t kill him the very next morning.”

Nelson’s encounter with the 170-class stud on Dec. 29 got off to a fortuitous start as he headed for a box stand on a hill on the private land he hunts near Sicily Island.

“On my way in, I picked up my phone to look at (trail-cam) pictures as to what was on the hill, and there was already a small 8-point there before daylight, so I decided not to go there,” he said. “Actually, I was going to go in the wrong spot. I’m telling you, I stayed up to 12 o’clock that night trying to judge that deer to where he might have been, but you just can’t predict big deer like that.”

Nelson abandoned his original plan, and headed south about 1½ miles to a different box stand overlooking three ridges, with a corn pile about 60 yards out. He blew a grunt call a few times, but didn’t see any activity — until he spotted a doe running down the ridge to his right around 7:45, heading his way.

“Just as she topped the hill, I heard something. I turned and looked back to my right, and I saw him — he was trailing right behind her,” Nelson said. “He come running off the top of that ridge and came down in the bottom and started up, then started slowing down — he realized where he was at. He was coming up to that corn at the opening — they associate that with humans. When he stopped halfway, he stopped behind some brush and I couldn’t see through it.”

The buck watched the doe take a quick bite of corn, and he turned and took two steps up the ridge and turned right, so Nelson could see his horns.

With the buck heading in the opposite direction, Nelson realized he might not ever get a second chance at this deer and decided to roll the dice with a 60-yard shot at a very small target.

His .35 Whelen was up to the task, and the buck lunged twice and then stopped behind some brush. So Nelson jumped down from the stand, reloaded his gun and ran to get a better vantage point.

“He was standing broadside down the hill watching the doe run off, and I put it right behind his shoulder this time,” Nelson said. “He ran about 40 yards and fell dead.”

The mainframe 8-pointer with two kickers on each of its tallest tines was worth the wait: With an inside spread of 23 inches and bases measuring 5 inches or better, the 190-pound deer stretched the tape to 173⅜ inches at Simmons’ Sporting Goods in Bastrop. ■

Read more of this story at Louisianasportsman.com/bigbucks.

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AG URGES SUPREME COURT TO PROTECT PUBLIC ACCESS TO CATAHOULA LAKE

From News Reports

With the rights of thousands of Louisiana sportsman on the line, Attorney General Jeff Landry is asking the Louisiana Supreme Court to reverse a lower court's decision in *Cooks & Crooks v. Louisiana Department of Natural Resources*.

"The Crooks case is one of the greatest threats to Louisiana's hunters and fishermen," said General Landry. "In addition to jeopardizing the public's right to access and use many Louisiana waterways for hunting, fishing, and habitat conservation - the suit also potentially could cost the State's taxpayers tens of millions of dollars." "While we were successful in having \$18

million in attorney's fees struck down by the appellate court, it is crucial that the Louisiana Supreme Court completely overturn the district court's decision," explained General Landry. "If that does not happen, decades of well-reasoned precedent will be disrupted and our State will be exposed to over \$40 million in damages. What's more: it would endanger the rights of Louisiana sportsmen to access large swaths of water in Catahoula Lake and other lakes like it."

"The lower courts' decisions would penalize important habitat management efforts that benefit sportsman and would



Attorney General Jeff Landry says closure would endanger the rights of sportsmen.

unfairly restrict public access to these waters by literally changing the definition of a 'lake,'" added General Landry. "I am dedicated to protecting the rights of sportsmen to both access and harvest from our State's bountiful waters. My office and I will continue to do all we legally can to do just that." ■

RECORD FLY-ROD REDFISH?

On Super Bowl Sunday, Phillip "Flip" Frank of New Orleans braved the fog with Capt. Rich Waldner, who spotted this huge redfish in a bayou off Barataria Bay. Using a Sage Salt 9-weight fly rod and reel spooled with Rlo Winter Redfish fly line, Frank flipped a purple Flip's Clouser fly in front of the huge red, which sucked the fly into its crushers. After a great battle, the fish came to the boat, and Waldner slipped his net into the red's front half, with the other half hanging out of the net. The red weighed 45 pounds on a Boga grip, easily topping the current Louisiana and world records for fly-rod reds. The fish was 50 inches long and 27 inches in girth. Using a length/girth formula, the red weighed 45.56 pounds just before being released alive.



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Seth LaHaye of Lafayette joined the Dirty 30 with this 30½-inch speck, caught in East Matagorda Bay in Texas.

By Allan Schilling

DIRTY 30

JOIN THIS EXCLUSIVE CLUB FOR
BIG SPECKLED TROUT ANGLERS

In most cases, having your name placed on a "Dirty 30" list might not seem like a positive development, but a citation program created by Chris Bush of The Speckled Truth honoring anglers who land a benchmark 30-inch speckled trout, is an exception.

The program, inspired by a Virginia angler-recognition program, began Oct. 1, 2017, covering coastal states from Virginia to Texas. In its first year, 59 entries were

certified as meeting the benchmark. So far, the list for 2018-2019 comprises 16 entries, including Seth LaHaye of Lafayette, La., who qualified with a 30½-inch speck from Texas' East Matagorda Bay.

Sponsors are jumping in to increase the program's stature in its second year. Now, along with a "Dirty 30" sticker, anglers will receive a "box chock-full of tackle," according to Bush, who estimates the value at \$70 to \$80.

Anglers, however, aren't the only ones who stand to benefit from the program. Tangible data leads to better conservation, Bush said.

"You want to have a measurable baseline," Bush said. "The more information, the better you can preserve the fisheries."

The data already has provided some interesting insights, Bush said, such as the fact that 87 percent of last year's trophy trout were caught on or around a new or

The "Dirty 30" program is free to enter but photos must include a measuring device.

full moon. And while catches were spread out somewhat evenly throughout the four seasons, anglers were more successful using artificials from March to October.

Bush said anglers can use the growing information from the program to their advantage. "You still have to find them, but you stack the odds in your favor."

The "Dirty 30" program is free to enter but photos must include a measuring device. For more information on the program go to thespeckledtruth.com.

LaHaye is the most-recent fishermen to join the Dirty 30. He was fishing with two buddies, Capt. Blake Miller and Jace Theriot, wading East Matagorda Bay. In the

wake of a new moon, LaHaye caught his 30½-inch, 7-pound, 12-pound giant on a bone-colored Corky Fatboy.

Thinking the fish might be a red, LaHaye fought it in a somewhat disinterested manner — until he saw it. He saw the unmistakable yellow mouth as the fish thrashed at the surface, setting his heart to a frantic beat.

After landing the fish, LaHaye gathered the required items for entry into the Dirty 30 program, taking a quality photo of the fish on or next to a measuring device, before releasing it alive. His was the 12th fish to qualify for the Dirty 30 list during the current citation year, which began Oct. 1, 2018, in the nine states participating in the program. ■



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From News Reports

GULF RESEARCH PROJECT WILL TAG 3,000 TO 5,000 FISH THIS SPRING

B iologists from the five Gulf states are conducting red snapper research later this spring, and any angler lucky enough to catch one of 3,000 to 5,000 tagged fish might make enough money to put a nice dent in their fuel bill.

Greg Stunz with Texas A&M-Corpus Christi said some fish will carry tags worth \$500 for the fishermen who catch them as part of a project to estimate just how many of fish actually live in the Gulf of Mexico. Fish are scheduled to be tagged in April and May, he said.

Each tag will be worth a minimum of \$250, and some fish will be tagged twice to help researchers learn how many tags fall out. The tags are yellow and have a five-digit tag number starting with the letters RS, and the words "Reward \$250. Keep tag," plus a phone number to call.



Offshore anglers could earn up to \$500 for a tagged red snapper as part of a research project to check the accuracy of federal snapper counts.

To get the reward, anglers need to report the port from which they departed, the date the fish was caught, the fish's length and weight, the fish's tag number and the latitude and longitude where it was caught. The tag itself should also be mailed in, though Stunz said researchers may accept photographs.

Scientists expect about 10 percent of the tagged fish to be caught in the \$12 million study called the Great Red Snapper Count, which was designed to check the accuracy of federal red snapper figures. ■

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HUNTER'S ILLINOIS NON-TYPICAL IS PENDING WORLD-RECORD

THE BUCK WAS A FREE-RANGING NATIVE

Virginia bowhunter Luke Brewster's huge Illinois buck, taken last November with a bow, appears to be the largest whitetail ever killed by a hunter.

The 39-point non-typical's rack was scored at 320 5/8 inches after grossing 330 even. Only two bucks in history have grown bigger headgears — the famous Hole-in-the-Horn buck and the Missouri Monarch — but both were found dead.

The official score of Brewster's buck was announced on Jan. 19 at the Archery Trade Association's show in Louisville, Ky.

"The Brewster buck is an all-timer, period," said Gordon Whittington, editor of *North American Whitetail*

magazine. "Not just according to the tape measure, but by his majestic overall look. He's huge and unique. The term "mega-giant" is perhaps overused, but it totally fits this deer. We live in an era of selectively bred, well-fed whitetails living out their lives in captivity, which has resulted in some freakishly large racks. But remember: This buck achieved his immense size and score as a free-ranging native animal."



Bowhunter Luke Brewster killed this 39-point, 320-inch monster in Illinois last fall.

North American Whitetail

The buck, killed in Edgar County, Ill, will be panel-scored later this summer by both Boone & Crockett Club and Pope & Young Club officials to determine a final, official score. ■

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By Brian Cope

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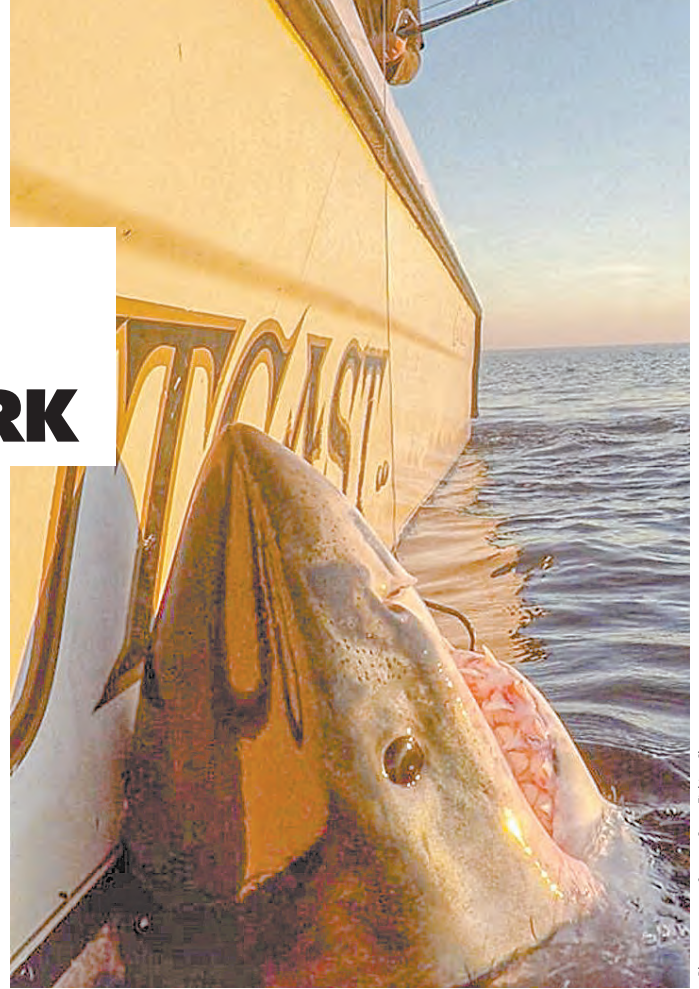
Capt. Chip Michalove of Outcast Sport Fishing Charters in Hilton Head Island, S.C. and his crew caught seven great white sharks off the coast of Hilton Head on Jan. 18. It's the most he's ever caught in a single day. They tagged four of the sharks, and released all seven.

And one, a 15-foot long, 2600-pound male, is the largest known male great white ever tagged in the Atlantic Ocean.

Michalove has hooked more than 30 great white sharks since 2015. That's when he caught his first one off South Carolina's coast. But seven in one day was epic, even for him.

"I've never dreamed of seeing that many in one day. We found this spot where there was a plethora of great whites. Like barracuda swarming a reef," he told *The Island Packet*.

Many fishing trips find anglers spending more time waiting for a bite than actually reeling in a fish. But Michalove said this trip was the opposite.



Photos courtesy Outcast Sport Fishing Charters



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A 15-foot great white shark caught and released off Hilton Head Island, S.C., is believed to be the largest male great white ever tagged in the Atlantic Ocean.

"We were battling great whites for more time than we were waiting for them. It was incredible," he said.

After having no luck in one of Michalove's normal hotspots, the crew came up with some other locales to try.

"Then it was like the fishing gods opened up and gave us this place. If we had more people (onboard), I feel like we could have caught two at a time," he said.

The tags they used will send data back to scientists as the creatures continue their journey. The information includes water depths, temperatures, how often and how far the sharks move, and which areas they spend most of their time.

One of the crew's sharks last Friday was a 12.5-foot, 1500-pound female that Michalove named Charli. He named the shark after 11-year-old Charli Bobinchuck, who was killed by a car in a crosswalk on Hilton Head this past summer.

The crew caught an 8-foot male toward the end of the trip. They named this one Frank after Frank Mundus, who is known

as the first angler to catch an Atlantic great white on rod-and-reel. With his crew tired and ready to celebrate, Michalove (843-290-0371) convinced them to stay for one more try. That's when they hooked the 15-foot male.

"They were beat, but I talked them into setting up the chum once more with a 'we'll give it an hour.' Thirty minutes and three Advil later, we had a hog swim up and take it. It turned out to be the largest male tagged in the Atlantic at approximately 2600 pounds. We've tagged three females in years before that were over 3000 pounds. But males are typically much smaller," he said.

"It was almost as wide as the boat. It's always shocking to not only see the length of these sharks, but their width and their power is just incredible," he said.

When Michalove first began fishing specifically for great whites, scientists didn't even know if the species even came near the coast of Hilton Head. In recent years, they've estimated that about 1000 spend



some time here during the winter. But he thinks the number may be much higher than that.

Michalove said if you'd like to keep track of the great whites he's caught, you can check them out with an app called Sharktivity. ■

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STATE PLEDGES TO HELP FILL EMPTY CHENIERE LAKE

By Kinny Haddox

Since 2016, when flash floods washed out the bridge and spillway that formed Cheniere Lake in West Monroe, the future of the popular fishing area has been in doubt. But that changed recently when the Ouachita Parish Police Jury received a pledge of up to \$4 million in state funds to construct a new spillway and refill the lake.

"I heard what I needed to hear, that we would have our Cheniere Lake and we could continue draining it to mimic natural water fluctuation," said Mike Wood, vice chairman of the Cheniere Lake Citizens' Advisory Committee. "Without the spillway, there is no Cheniere Lake. It could be known as the place formerly known as Cheniere Lake."

The state funding will allow for a new spillway and drainage-control structure, according to information shared at a January meeting of the Police Jury by consulting engineer Kevin Crosby. The announcement followed a meeting with parish officials and Shawn Wilson, secretary of the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development and Sen. Jim Fannin (R-Jonesboro) in January.

When the lake is full, it covers approximately 3,600 acres and is the largest lake in Ouachita Parish. It was formed in 1946. The cypress and tupelo gum brake is hard to navigate and has very little open water, but it provides great bream, crappie and bass fishing. Public boat ramps and a park area provide easy access.

In 2016, the flooding damage

at Cheniere Lake was severe, with the collapse of the spillway causing the lake to drain into the Ouachita River. The roadway had to be closed for a year for repairs, and the area has never recovered. The lake remains basically empty.

While the formal agreement and funding has not been officially signed, local leaders are confident that this first good news for the lake in nearly three years will provide recreation on the area for the next generation. The proposed design entails building new gates downstream from the current gates as well as an earthen spillway, or dam, with a fixed concrete weir. According

to early cost estimates, this approach will cost less than half as much as rebuilding the former spillway structure.

Police Jury Vice President Jack Clampit said that although it took three years to put the plan together and get approval, it is a good solution that will hold Cheniere Lake for another 50 or 60 years. ■



Cheniere Lake in West Monroe is difficult to navigate, but it's home to plenty of great panfish: bream, crappie and bass.



Cheniere Lake was basically emptied with flooding in 2016 washed away the bridge and spillway that impounded the 3,600-acre lake.



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PIROGUE ANGLER LANDS 11-POUND TOLEDO BEND MONSTER BASS

By Patrick Bonin

SATTLER'S BIG BASS FELL TO A PLASTIC WORM

Coastal kayak anglers eagerly anticipate a 'Cajun sleigh ride,' the nickname given for a freshly-hooked redfish that takes off and hauls 'yak and fisherman on a fun, line-peeling, drag-screaming journey.

Even though he was pretty far from South Louisiana, Jared Sattler got a Cajun sleigh ride of his own up in Desoto Parish on Saturday afternoon — but it obviously wasn't a redfish doing the pulling.

Sattler was fishing in a 12-foot Water Moccasin pirogue when he set the hook on a whopping 11.41-pound lunker largemouth bass on the north end of Toledo Bend.

"It drug my pirogue all over the place," Sattler said with a chuckle. "Let me tell you what, that thing was popping a wheelie."

He and his dad, Ray, had departed from Circle Drive Landing around 9 a.m. in two pirogues — and it was pretty slow going for a while.

"We put the boats in the water and it started raining, so we got back in the truck for a few minutes and finally decided we weren't going to wait the rain off so we just started fishing — and man, we didn't have a bite til about 12 o'clock," he said. "I was throwing the kitchen sink at 'em, and I couldn't get a bite.

"Finally about 12 or 12:30 I switched up what I was throwing again and it just kind of turned on, and I caught three fish and two keepers in about 20 minutes. Then I caught the big one."

Sattler said he was fishing ledges of creeks in the Circle Drive area, and had just caught a nice fish on a tree while he worked the area with his trolling motor as he was heading for another cypress. He was fishing with a Texas-rigged, 6-inch plastic worm (that's as specific as he would get.)

"I thought, 'You know I can pitch and hit that tree real quick before I get too close to

it.' She nailed it as soon as it hit the water almost, and I set the hook and I felt like I hooked a stump — it just didn't move," Sattler said.

"And it just kind of eased off with it, so I thought, 'Alright, I'm going to get another good hook set to make sure I have it good.' And I waited until it turned away from me to set against it, and when I did — all hell broke loose.

"It had the rod doubled over, and I could not turn her. She was just taking line for about 10 yards or so. Honestly, the thought crossed my mind that there was no way it was a fish — I figured I had hooked a giant turtle or a big old buffalo. But when she turned, she barely broke the top of the water and I saw how big her mouth was, and I got buck fever then. I started shaking and praying."

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the big fish wore down, and the 29-year-old Greenwood resident lipped it into the pirogue.

"I was sitting there holding her just shaking uncontrollably, and I was like, 'I have got to get this thing into the ice chest, because it was all I could do to hold on to it,'" he said. "She had the hook pretty deep down in her mouth, but I've never caught a fish so big that I could just reach my hand in and undo the hook.

"I stuck my hand down in her mouth and she latched on to it like a catfish and scarred me up - my hand looks like it got drug down



Jared Sattler, of Greenwood, shows off the 11.41-pound bass he reeled in Saturday afternoon, Feb. 9, on the north end of Toledo Bend.

Photo: Toledo Bend Lunker Bass Program

a gravel road."

Sattler didn't have a livewell on board, but estimated the fish was in the 8-pound range, so he wedged the big bass into a 48-quart Igloo and motored over to his dad's pirogue. Because several other anglers were in the area, he quietly told his father he had just caught the biggest fish of his life. (His previous best was a



Photo: courtesy of Toledo Bend Lunker Bass Program

THREE FISH — 27 POUNDS

Malcolm Crochet, of Loreauville, reeled in this 10.47-pounder on the south end of Toledo Bend on Sunday, Feb. 10. Crochet, who was fishing with a dark Big Monster worm in about 20 feet of water, reeled in an 8-pounder, then an 8-14, then this double-digit fish on a day most bass anglers only dream about. "I had like 27 ½ pounds with those three fish," Crochet said.

6.1-pounder from the same area two years ago.)

"He pulled up alongside me and opened the ice chest and he looked at me and said, 'Son, she's way bigger than 8,'" he said.

They placed the bass in his dad's livewell, then motored back to their truck and headed to Huxley Bay Marina in Shelbyville, Texas, where the bass officially tipped certified scales there at 11.41 pounds. (It was previously caught last September by Shane Murphy, when it weighed 11.11 pounds.)

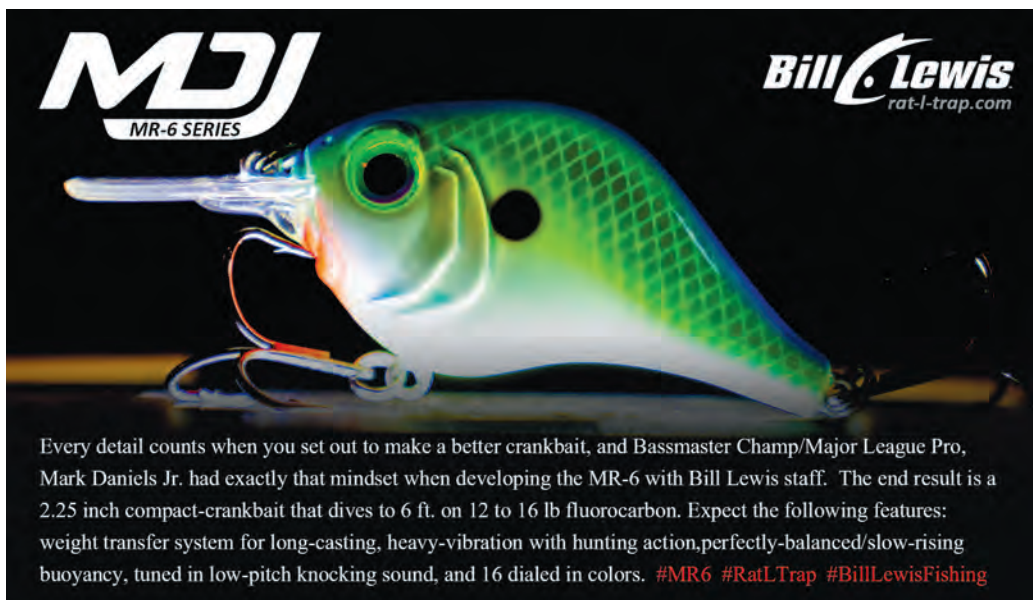
The big bass measured 26 inches long with a 21-inch girth, and is the 21st fish entered into the 2018-19 Toledo Bend Lunker Bass Program, which awards anglers who release double-digit fish back into the reservoir with a free replica mount.

So the good news is Sattler reeled in the fish of a lifetime,

and will have a complimentary mount to remember a very special day. The bad news is he's actually allergic to fish slime, and he paid the price Saturday night.

"It's the weirdest thing. I love to fish, so it

couldn't have happened to anybody better," he said with a laugh. "But my hand swole up to the size of a football that night." ■



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HUNTERS IN CAROLINAS KILL 149 COYOTES IN WEEKEND

Hunters killed 149 coyotes during the sixth annual Carolina Coyote Classic Feb. 9 - 10, 2019. Headquartered in Stanly County, N.C., the competition takes place across North Carolina and South Carolina and gives hunters a chance to compete and share notes with like-minded outdoorsmen while doing their part to curb the overpopulation

of coyotes in both states. Team Merciless, made up of hunters Steven Davis and Colt Minton, won \$2,200 cash and a host of hunting-related prizes for killing 17 coyotes. Prizes were also awarded for biggest male coyote, biggest female coyote, and smallest coyote. Coyotes have become a nuisance in all 146 counties of the Carolinas.

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- Cross Lake
- Lake Bistineau
- Wallace Lake

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KBF is working on crazy lodging discounts, too.

Stop back by; more details to come.

This will be a 3-day event (Thursday, Friday and Saturday) with a side KBF Big Bass Brawl. The field will be trimmed after Day 2, and the top 100 competitors will meet on one of the bodies of water on Saturday.

While they chase down a limit that produces the next KBF National Champion, all others who entered the KBF Big Bass Brawl will be invited to fish on Saturday for even greater big bass prizes. Prize ceremonies and awards will be Saturday evening. ■

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DERIDDER ANGLER FINALLY LANDS ELUSIVE TOLEDO BEND LUNKER

By Patrick Bonin

IT TOOK MORE THAN 50 YEARS OF TRYING, BUT MIERS GETS DOUBLE-DIGIT BASS

Jim Miers has been bass fishing for a long, long time — more than 50 years by his count, including close to 1,000 trips up to Toledo Bend.

"I was bass fishing before Toledo Bend was built, and I really got into it after Toledo Bend was built," said Miers, 64 years young, who lives in DeRidder and serves as the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in nearby Merryville. "So I've been bass fishing 50-plus years."

Before last Monday, his biggest bass ever was in the 7-pound range. But that all changed Feb. 4 around noon, when Miers set the hook on a big bass nestled in a treetop on the south end of the Bend in the Mill Creek area.

The hawg weighed-in officially at 10.96 pounds, only a half-ounce shy of 11, and just like that the double-digit fish that had eluded him all those years was finally in the boat.

So was maybe a little divine intervention involved in landing the lunker?

"Ain't no doubt about it," Miers said with a chuckle. "But I told my wife if it takes me 65 years to catch another one that big, I better hurry up 'cause I'll be getting pretty old by then."

Miers was with church member Roger Hogue on a still, foggy morning when they launched from the Texas public ramp on the south side of Toledo Bend near the dam.

"We were in muddy water to start with and weren't doing real good," he said. "I always throw out some noodles and wienies to catch catfish, and we caught quite a few."

"Then I said, 'Let's go find some clear water and bass fish a little bit.'"

Miers was fishing with a Texas-rigged

Zoom lizard in sprayed grass color when he targeted a top that was only partially visible in about 6 feet of water. At first, he didn't even think he had a fish — much less a lunker.

"We had found some hydrilla growing again, and actually I thought I had a ball of grass," he said. "I was fiddling around doing something else and I turned around to look at it and it stopped, and I figured I was hung in the treetop."

"Then it started going sideways. She never bumped it or anything — she just picked it up and came toward the boat."

That all changed once he set the hook, but he enjoyed the fight, keeping his rod tip down in the water to prevent the big female from breaking the surface.

"I knew it was a big fish," said Miers, who ultimately lipped the bass aboard. "Even for a 64-year-old, it was an exciting time. It's the biggest one I ever caught, so it was exciting."

He and Hogue packed up and instantly headed to Buckeye Landing, where the 25 ½-inch bass tipped certified scales there at 10.96 pounds, easily qualifying for entry into the Toledo Bend Lunker Bass Program, which awards anglers who return double-digit fish to the reservoir with a complimentary mount.

And Miers knows exactly where this fish is going on the wall — right near an 8-plus-pounder his wife caught years ago



Jim Miers, of DeRidder, landed this 10.96-pound bass on the south end of Toledo Bend in the Mill Creek area on Feb. 4. The lunker bit a Texas-rigged Zoom lizard in sprayed grass color.

Photo courtesy of Jim Miers

in an employees' tournament up at the Bend for Beauregard Electric Co-op, where she worked for more than 30 years.

"She was the only woman in it. She caught an 8 ¼, won the big bass, won the big stringer, won all the money — and they haven't had a tournament since," Miers said with a laugh. "So I've been looking at that fish all these years, because that's bigger than anyone I've ever caught. But now I got her ..."

"I want to try to mount my fish where it's about to eat hers, but I don't know if I'll be able to do that." ■

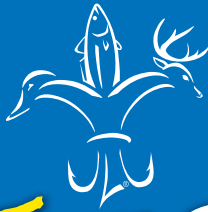


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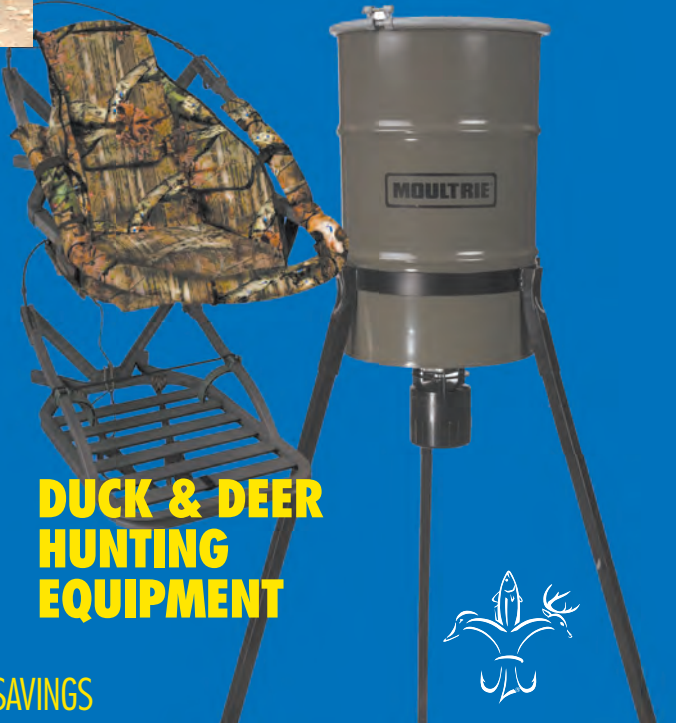
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40TH EVENT TO BE HELD MARCH 14-17 AT LAMAR-DIXON EXPO CENTER

The 40th Annual Louisiana Sportsman Show and Festival, Louisiana's largest outdoor and boat show, will be held March 14-17 at the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales.

The show features acres of boats, fishing and hunting equipment, ATVs, tractors and outdoor power equipment, plus activities for the entire family.

More than 250 vendors will be at the show, offering acre upon acre of fishing

tackle and hunting gear.

But there really are three shows — the main show, a boat show and a power equipment show — held on the same grounds over the four-day run starting Thursday, March 14.

And all three are included in a single admission fee of just \$12 dollars per day.

Show hours are noon to 7 p.m. on Thursday and Friday, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Saturday and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday.

The main Louisiana Sportsman Show

includes a variety of family oriented events:

- The QDMA Louisiana Sportsman Big Buck Contest, sponsored by Bowie Outfitters, will display of some of the largest bucks killed this season in Mississippi, Louisiana and across the country. Assorted trophies and prizes will be awarded to the winners in each category.
- The Abu Garcia interactive casting booth will feature casting competitions

Saturday and Sunday, with prizes presented to winners of the adult and kids divisions. And if you need to hone your casting skills, experts will be on hand to help out.

- Splash Dogs, where participants can enter their dogs in retriever competitions.
- Scout Day is Thursday (March 14), with all uniformed Scouts and leaders getting into the show free.
- A Kids Area, with free admission to the show for kids on Sunday.
- Fetch & Fish, featuring a huge fish tank in which regular fishing seminars and retriever demonstrations will be conducted.
- The Sportsman Zone brought to you by Bowie Outfitters, which houses everything fishing and more. Bowie's has bought truckloads of product just for this event, and huge discounts will be offered on many items.
- Fishing and hunting outfitters from across the world for the adventure vacation of a lifetime!
- A full food court.

In addition to the Louisiana Sportsman Show, the Louisiana Sportsman Boat Show is the place to be if you're even thinking about buying a boat.

This huge boat show, sponsored by Neighbors Federal Credit Union, will again provide one-stop shopping with special show pricing from all major brands of bass, bay and pontoon boats. Plus, loan officers will be on site for special financing offers.

And do you happen to be in the market for a new piece of power equipment? That's no problem, since the expanded Louisiana Sportsman power equipment area will feature products by Kubota, John Deere, Toro, Stihl, Husqvarna, Mahindra and many other brands, ATVs, UTVs, golf carts and other forms of power equipment. Again, special show-only pricing will be offered.

For more details and a schedule of events, visit LouisianaSportsmanShow.com. ■



SPORTSMAN DISCOUNT ZONE

The Discount Zone is back for the 2019 Louisiana Sportsman Show, and you won't want to miss out on all the deals on its wide array of hunting and fishing gear.

The Zone, presented by Bowie Outfitters, will be full of incredible deal on all manner of outdoor equipment.

"The folks at Bowie Outfitters are bringing trailer loads of items to be sold in the Discount Zone; they have been buying merchandise all year to ensure they don't run out of fantastic show deals," Sportsman Show organizer Jack Fisher said. "They'll be restocking the shelves in the Discount Zone throughout the show, and you won't believe the deals you'll find."

Bowie Outfitter's Lea Benoit said the 3,000-square foot zone will be stuffed

with all manner of fishing and hunting gear.

"We're still offering great deals on rods, reels, combos, baits and ice chests," Benoit said.

"Shimano, Daiwa, Lews, Okuma, Abu Garcia, Penn, Falcon, Costa, 13 Fishing and Kysek Coolers are the big boys we'll have in stock. We'll have lure companies, as well.

"We're probably up to five trailers of merchandise now."

And the incredibly low pricing will be available only at the Louisiana Sportsman Show, so be sure and purchase your tickets today. ■

- SHIMANO
- DAIWA
- LEWS
- OKUMA
- ABU GARCIA
- PENN
- FALCON
- COSTA
- 13 FISHING
- KYSEK COOLERS AND MORE!

MORE SHOW NEWS >

Louisiana
**SPORTSMAN
SHOW** & festival

MARCH 14-17
AT LAMAR-DIXON EXPO CENTER

SPLASH DOGS



With winter drawing to a close, dog owners are looking for ways to engage their dogs physically and psychologically. Retrievers are looking for something to chase. House dogs are tired of being indoors, and they too are looking for something to do.

This is what prompted Tony Reed to develop Splash Dogs, which allows dogs to stretch out and see how far they can jump. And this dock-jumping competition is fast becoming one of America's

most-popular outdoor events!

The competition allows dogs to compete for distance, diving from a dock into a 40-foot-long pool. No other outdoor event brings families and people together better or puts more smiles on faces than Splash Dog events.

"Yes, we add an element of competition, but we're more about the family fun," Reed said. "We have a set of rules, but we'll bend them. If a dog doesn't quite make it one time, it's not going to hurt to give them back the toy and let them try to

experience getting off the dock and feeling confident.

"It's a great experience to watch people having fun with their dogs."

Pet owners travel to these events from all over the region to compete. It's a great new sport that everyone loves.

Competition is open to dogs of all breeds and ages, from lean Vizslas to shaggy Newfoundlands, all the way to Jack Russell terriers, Labradors and pit bulls. ■

POWER EQUIPMENT

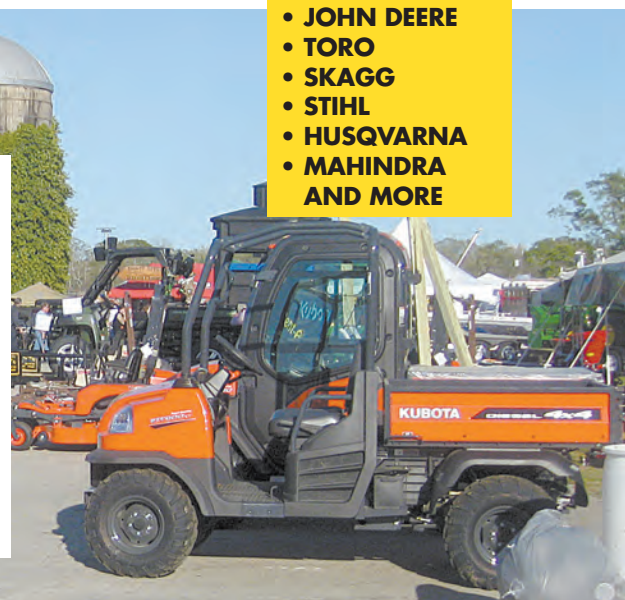
Tractors, farm equipment and lawn mowers and equipment will be displayed and available for sale at the Louisiana Sportsman Show and Festival set for March 14-17 at the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales.

Dealers from throughout South Louisiana will be on hand with all the latest offerings of most brands of tractors and other outdoor power equipment, with low pricing available only at the show. The power equipment section

doubled in size this year, so you can find everything you need to prepare and manage your food plots, maintain your hunting lease or fishing property, or just keep the grass cut.

Both residential and commercial models will be featured, with dealers offering a full line of accessories, and special pricing will be available. Choose from brands including Kubota, John Deere, Toro, Skagg, Stihl, Husqvarna, Mahindra, Kioti and more. ■

- KUBOTA
- JOHN DEERE
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- MAHINDRA AND MORE



FETCH-N-FISH TUB RETURNS



Back at the show is the Fetch-n-Fish Tub, with nationally known Jason Reynolds combining fishing seminars with dog shows.

Throughout the show, Reynolds will be featuring his high-flying dogs that will be jumping into his 41-foot-long bass tub.

The show invites audience participation, particularly from children who help mark the longest jumps — and might get wet in the process.

“Basically, what we do is a family fun program,” Reynolds said. “We talk a little about obedience, then a little about dog training, and I mix it with some and some fun games and some dog tricks. And the ultimate of the show is when I have the dogs jump in the fish tank.”

“This is not just dog training — this is entertainment. This is something the whole family can relate to. The kids love it.”

But this show isn’t all about dog jumping; the 4,000-gallon tank also is stocked with bass and used to demonstrate fishing tactics.

“It’s a home run,” Reynolds said of the combined dog and fishing shows.

Go to LouisianaSportsman-Show.com to find a schedule of events. ■

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EXPANDED BOAT SHOW

The Louisiana Sportsman Show scheduled for March 14-17 will provide an even greater focus on the latest boat offerings.

The Sportsman Boat Show, sponsored by Neighbors Federal Credit Union, is being held at the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales in conjunction with the Sportsman Show. It will include more than 20 boat dealers in a dedicated 75,000-square-foot building, including brands never before at the show.

"I think it's safe to say that every major boat line and outboard manufacturer will

be represented," show organizer Jack Fisher said. "So you don't have to drive all over the place to compare what's out there; you can simply walk through the Louisiana Sportsman Boat Show to look at all the features available in the current models of boats."

The show will include dealers' offerings for both freshwater and saltwater fishing applications, but that's not all.

"We'll also have a full range of duck-hunting boats, along with kayaks and pontoons," Fisher said.

And the best part is that entry to the

Louisiana Sportsman Boat Show is included in the general admission price of the Louisiana Sportsman Show.

"This way, you can check out all the boats, but move back and forth to the main show to see what fishing tackle and hunting accessories are available," Fisher said. "You also can check out all the special events, like the Louisiana Sportsman Big Buck Contest, the 40-foot Fetch-N-Fish Tub and Splash Dogs.

"And it's all available for one low price — \$12 dollars."

Brands expected at the show include Alumacraft, Axis, Bayliner, Bentley Pontoons, Berkshire Pontoons, BlackJack, Blazer, Blazer Bay, Blue Wave, Carolina Skiff, G3, Gator Trax, Hanko Aluminum, Malibu, Nautic Star, Nitro, Phoenix, Premier Pontoons, Pursuit, Ranger, SeaArk, Sea Fox, Sea Pro, Shearwater, SilverWave, Skeeter, South Bay Pontoons, South Fork, Stratos, SunTracker, Tahoe, Tidewater, Tracker, Veranda, War Eagle, Xcel, Xcursion Pontoons and Xpress. Motor lines include Gator Tail, Mercury, MinnKota, Mud Buddy, Pro-Drive, Suzuki, Tohatsu and Yamaha. ■

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CROSSBOW**

With hunting season in the books, it's time to make plans to bring your bucks to the Louisiana Sportsman Big Buck Contest, scheduled for March 15-17.

Even if your deer mount isn't complete, you can make arrangements with your taxidermist to bring the antlers to the contest, which is being hosted by the Quality Deer Management Association's South Louisiana Branch and sponsored by Bowie Outfitters.

Deer may be dropped off beginning Friday, March 15, but must be entered no later than 6 p.m. on Saturday, March 16. No deer will be accepted before Friday.

It's free to enter — just bring your unscored deer from the 2018-19 or 2017-18 seasons to the show.

Winners will be named in the following categories:

- Best Louisiana Gun

- Best Louisiana Bow
- Best Out-of-State Gun
- Best Out-of-state Bow
- Best Ladies
- Best Youth
- Best Muzzleloader/Crossbow

All deer will be scored by official Boone & Crockett and Pope & Young scorers. Of course, only those past the mandatory 60-day drying period will receive final scores.

Bucks entered in any previous Louisiana Sportsman Big Buck Contest are not eligible.

Bucks killed in seasons before the 2017-18 hunting season can be entered for scoring, but are not eligible for contest prizes.

All entries will be displayed on the Big Buck Contest wall until the winners are announced March 17. ■

BIG BUCK CONTEST RULES

- All legally killed, free-range bucks shot during the 2018-19 season and those deer from the 2017-18 season that have not been officially scored or previously entered in this contest are eligible for entry in any of the seven categories: Best Louisiana Gun, Best Louisiana Bow, Best Out-of-State Gun, Best Out-of-State Bow, Ladies, Youth, /Crossbow.

- All bucks beyond the 60-day drying period will receive an official Boone & Crockett or Pope & Young score.

- Any buck killed within the previous 60 days will be scored and entered in the contest, but the score will not be official.

- Only free-range whitetails from any of the 50 U.S. states are eligible.

- Bucks killed with primitive arms that aren't true muzzleloaders will be entered in the gun categories.

- Youth category entrants must have been 15 or younger at the time of the kill.

- Bucks killed before the contest period may still be brought in for scoring but will not be eligible for the contest or the random drawing.

- Bucks must be brought in during show hours Friday or before 6 p.m. Saturday to be eligible for the contest. NOTE: No entries accepted before Friday.

- Racks must remain at the show until 2 p.m. Sunday, and may not be removed before that time.

- Louisiana Sportsman reserves the right to add or alter rules at its discretion.



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March 15 means different things to different people. It's the Ides of March — the date Julius Caesar was assassinated in Rome in 44 B.C. Unfortunately, it also means you have exactly one month to go before your federal taxes are due to Uncle Sam.

But in Southwest Louisiana, March 15 has long been circled on the calendars of bass anglers in pursuit of the fish of a lifetime: the Lacassine Pool will reopen for the first time since it closed last October.

The shallow, freshwater impoundment south of Lake Arthur is well known as one of the few spots in Southwest Louisiana where anglers have a real chance at landing a trophy, double-digit fish.



BY PATRICK BONIN

Lacassine Pool opens up to bass anglers in the middle of March. Here's how one angler — who caught five double-digit bass there last year alone — fishes the 16,000-acre impoundment inside the Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge in Southwest Louisiana.

RULE THE POOL



Take Johnny Watkins for example.

A 41-year-old captain with the Lake Charles Fire Department from Longville, he caught five double-digit fish there — in 2018 alone. He has been fishing the Pool since he was a teenager and has fond memories of sleeping while waiting in line for the refuge gates to swing open on the first day of the season.

“Gosh, I’ve seen that line with a couple of hundred trucks in it before. I mean it’s crazy. It’s wild, man. We used to go out there and spend the night when I was in my early 20s,” Watkins said. “But over the years, I’ve learned you can just get out there around 7 o’clock, let those guys get in the water — and you’re only missing an hour’s worth of fishing.”

Watkins said he’s literally lost track of the 10-pounders he’s caught in the Pool, but he did reel in two 11-pounders about two weeks apart last spring and has more than 25 years of experience to share about targeting big fish in March.

“When it opens up, to me, your bigger fish are predominantly in the bigger ponds,” he said, noting depths in the impoundment typically range from about 2 to 4 feet. “Any of the big ponds — like Little North Lake, North Lake and South Pond — hold the deeper water, which holds the bigger fish. You know how those big fish are: they like that deep water and cover. And in the bigger ponds, they have deep water, cover and food — so

they don’t have to go anywhere.

“Canals are deeper, and you can catch big fish in the canals, but the thing is, there’s a lot of boat traffic, and those fish get really finicky due to the boat activity in the canals. They’re constantly being run over by boat motors in the first few weeks.”

For the uninitiated, motor restrictions are in place inside the refuge. A 40-HP motor is the biggest you can run, and one unit is set aside strictly for non-motorized vessels, like kayaks and canoes, and Watkins said he holds some impressive bass.

TIE ON A FROG

Watkins didn’t hesitate when asked about his go-to lure at Lacassine: a Stanley Ribbit in watermelon/pearl belly on a 5/0 weightless offset hook.

“I throw that more than anything,” he said. “The noise that frog makes for some reason gets those fish mad. I’ve caught some big fish when it first opens up on a topwater frog like a Ribbit or a Top Toad, some real big fish, like 8- and 9-pounders, doing that.”

On a cloudy day, he’ll opt for the black Ribbit with red flakes. On bluebird days, he goes natural with the watermelon and pearl.

The habitat is mostly grass and lily pads, but in March, the



BELOW: Lacassine Pool is like heaven for Southwest Louisiana bass anglers. Its shallow, grassy habitat produces some lunker fish.

pads haven't opened up. Watkins favors a stealthy approach that works well for him out in the open water where he typically finds bigger fish.

"The root systems are still under the water, but the actual pads themselves haven't surfaced yet. So you're fishing grass. If you get a decent wind, you can go to the upwind side of the pond and make a drift and systematically aim your drifts across the pond," he said. "You can cover a whole pond like that really fast, and it's really quiet, because you don't have to stay on your trolling motor and disturb a bunch of water.

"So it's really a stealthy way to fish — you let the wind push you across that flat, and a lot of times those fish don't even know you're there."

If his frog isn't producing near the surface, Watkins might opt for a creature bait instead.

"If they're not hitting the Ribbit, I'll throw a Speed Craw out there, even if I have to put a 1/32-ounce weight on it — something real small so I can get some casting distance out of it," he said. "I'll keep my rod tip up real high and reel that Speed Craw on top of the water just like a Ribbit. It makes a little less noise with a little smaller profile if they're being finicky."

A FLUKE IS NO FLUKE UP NEXT >



Photo courtesy of Johnny Watkins



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A Zoom Fluke fished on a weightless worm hook is a great bait for bedding bass.

A FLUKE IS NO FLUKE

If a cold front has just passed through and mid-March features chilly conditions, Watkins might opt for a watermelon red Zoom Fluke or a 6-inch Zoom lizard.

He'll blind-cast the Fluke on a 4/0 weightless offset hook, but he's always vigilant for bedding fish in the typically clear March water.

"I just keep my eyes peeled if I roll across a bed," he said. "Not all of them have fish on them, but sometimes you'll get blessed and run across one with a big fish on it. That's when you'll go with your choice of soft plastic baits: a lizard or a creature bait or a Fluke."

Unlike some anglers who use bright colors on bedding fish so they can more easily see the strike, Watkins keeps his presentation a little more subdued.

"I try to stay natural with that; a lot of people go with white just so they can see the fish inhale the bait. I think that's great, and it does work, but I found you can get those fish to bite quicker with a natural-color bait like a green pumpkin or a watermelon red, something that looks like a bream or is crawfish-colored," he said. "To me, it's natural and blends in with the moss out there. I'll get them to eat a lot faster on that color than something white or brightly colored."



LEAPIN' LIZARDS

A soft-plastic lizard can be fished on the bottom, but it's effective swimming just under the surface.

Another of Watkins' go-to Pool lures in March (and into the spring) is a 6-inch Zoom lizard, which he often rigs with a 1/16-ounce bullet weight for more casting distance. It's another good cool-weather option if the Ribbit isn't producing on a given day.

"Especially when it first opens up and there's cooler weather, sometimes they'll come up and just blast that frog, but those Florida bass are affected by cold weather a lot, especially in only 2 or 3 feet of water," he said. "But I'll fish that lizard about 6 inches under the surface."

"Reel it on a steady retrieve with your rod tip up. That way, if you see something following your bait, you can drop your rod and it will give you enough slack where that fish can inhale the bait and you can reel down to it and set the hook."

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Lily pads are a predominant feature in the shallow waters of Lacassine Pool.

GEAR UP FOR A LUNKER

Watkins stresses that you can encounter big fish in grass, reeds, lily pads and cover, so your converted speckled trout rod might not be what you need if you get bit by a hawg.

To that end, Watkins said his go-to rod for the Pool is a 7-foot, heavy action broomstick. For flipping in the late-spring and summer, he goes with a 7-foot-6, extra-heavy action rod.

"I like a little softer tip on a frog rod, but I still don't sacrifice the backbone of the rod. The bottom three-quarters are still pretty stiff," he said. "I really want to turn that head as soon as I can and get it coming toward me.

"If you can do that, your catch ratio really goes up significantly. If you go a limber rod and set the hook, they'll actually run away from you for a second or two — and they're normally hanging around some kind of ambush spot, so they can turn really fast and put you in a bind.

"I've seen people go out there with limber rods, and you're going to have a hard time if you hook a big fish on a limber rod. It's going to take you for a ride and get wrapped up. You have to get that fish's head turned and coming toward you — quick."

Don't skimp on line, either. Even in the clear water of the Pool, Watkins goes with 65-pound PowerPro braided tied straight to the hook.

"To me, braided line is big out there. If you're blessed and hook up to one of those big fish, you don't want to lose it," he said. "I use 65-pound braid because I like to target big fish. You could probably go down to 40 if you were fishing the flats with a Fluke and weren't flipping, but I used to fish monofilament out there, and I landed a lot more fish after I went to braided line. If you hook one of those big fish on light line, it's going to break you off. It will take you down and wrap you up in that stuff and break your heart."



Photo courtesy of Johnny Watkins

An advertisement for Toledo Bend Lake Country. It features a man in a bright yellow shirt and sunglasses holding a large bass. The background is a blue sky with the text "ONE OF THE BEST BASS LAKES IN NORTH AMERICA" and "WATER YOU WAITING FOR?". The Toledo Bend Lake Country logo is at the bottom, along with the website "ToledoBendLakeCountry.com", the phone number "1-800-358-7802", and social media icons for Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The Louisiana logo "LOUISIANA Feed Your Soul." is also present.

PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE
UP NEXT >



PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

Watching the explosion of a giant bass devouring a topwater frog makes most bass anglers weak in the knees. Often though, a quick hook-set results in the frog whistling back at you — minus the fish.

Watkins said he learned the hard way that patience — as tough as it is to practice — is key when setting the hook with a frog.

“I learned over the years to keep my rod tip up. If I’m walking the dog with that frog, I’ll keep the rod tip down. But anything other than that, I have my rod tip up. But the biggest thing is I make myself count to two,” Watkins said. “It’s just human nature to immediately set the hook. Over the years, though, you miss enough fish, and you’re like, ‘Okay dummy, you got to do something different.’”

“I say ‘a-thousand-one, a-thousand-two,’ and as I’m doing that, I’m dropping my rod and reeling in my slack. To me, if you count to two, it gives them a chance to eat it. A lot of people say they let their line get tight, but I can’t wait that long. Counting to two definitely has helped me put a lot more fish in the boat.... The more you do it, the more you can wait, but it’s hard.”

CATCH, PHOTO, RELEASE

There aren’t any refuge rules about releasing lunker bass; you can certainly keep them if you so choose. But Watkins hopes you’ll consider letting big girls go back to spawn and swim another day. If you land a fish of a lifetime, take some photos and measurements and commemorate it with a replica mount.

“I don’t think a lot of people realize how special this place is. I hate to say it, but I think a lot of folks take it for granted,” he said. “There’s been a 13-pounder caught out of there before.... It’s crazy. I try to encourage everybody to catch and release out there.... I try to practice that.”

BRINGIN’ THE HEAT

Watkins said as long as there’s not a prolonged drought that drops the water level, the frog, Fluke and creature bait pattern should last into the early summer, when heat finally moves the bass from the shallows into deeper water.

“As it starts heading to summertime, your pads start coming up, and your pattern totally changes. You have to throw a hollow-body frog like a Top Toad and fish the holes in the lily pads,” he said. “Those fish, when it gets really, really hot, they’ll go bury down deep in those canals; some of them are 8 to 10 feet deep. They go in that cooler water, and you have to pick up a big 1-ounce weight and actually punch the pads and the grass on the sides of the canals. I’ve caught some big fish doing that — but not everybody has the patience for it.”

The fish will tell you when to make the move to the deeper



Photo courtesy of Johnny Watkins

Johnny Watkins caught these two double-digit fish in April 2017 on back-to-back casts, one on a Ribbit and one on a creature bait.

water pattern, he said.

“Everybody asks, ‘When do you start flipping?’ The fish will tell you when to start. You’ll notice. You’ll go from catching them in the flats in the ponds, then it gets slow so you have to adjust,” he said. “You have to move with the fish — they’ll eventually make their way out to the canals depending on the water level.”

“If we get a drought, they’ll get to the canals earlier than they normally would to survive.

But normally, it takes a while for that water to heat up before the majority make their way to the canals. June is usually when that happens.” ■



Patrick Bonin, a lifelong Louisiana resident, has covered outdoor news in the Bayou State for years.

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By Don Shoopman

TOLEDO BEND GRASS UPDATE

Bass is finally making a comeback after the record flood of 2016. Here's where...



Hunter Martin and Justin Jacob caught these lunkers in shallower than normal waters while scouting for the BASS Louisiana High School State tournament last year. They ended the tourney in 2nd place with 20.38 pounds, earning them a birth at the BASS Nationals tournament on Kentucky Lake.

When Villis Dowden talks about the lack of underwater vegetation on Toledo Bend, he points to high-water conditions in 2016.

There was a record flood, with the lake cresting two feet above full pool of 172.0 feet above sea level, and all of the spillway gates were opened. That caused muddy water to gush out of the creeks into the main lake, critically raising turbidity levels, shading out the lake's primary submergent aquatic vegetation. >

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TOLEDO BEND GRASS UPDATE

V

More and more development along the shoreline, mainly on the Louisiana side, adds to the effect in toad-floater downpours. As a result, many areas aren't as clear as they were 15 or 20 years ago — Lanan Creek, Negreet Creek and Pirate's Cove — and the increased turbidity has taken a toll on grass, according to Dowden, a fisheries biologist with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries who works out of Natchitoches. "We've lost a lot of habitat on each side of the lake" due to watershed management issues and other issues, Dowden said in mid-January. "It is coming back in certain parts of the lake. It's trying to in some places. I do suspect it will come back," he said, adding a qualifier — if the water is low, around 168.0 feet, this summer and fall.

Every time they visit the lake, Dowden and his staff take water-quality samples, which include turbidity readings. Turbidity the past 1½ years has been much, much higher than before, he said. It shades the underwater vegetation, effectively affecting its growth.

From a bass fisherman's point of view, grass is a place to target fish in their natural habitat. Weedless soft plastics, like bogus frogs, punchin', C-rigging, etc., come into play.

From Dowden's point of view, grass is vital to the survival of the young-of-the-year bass from each spawn. He said he found grass from North Toledo Bend State Park to San Patricio Creek, but it wasn't deep, and a little bit of underwater vegetation far up the lake around Oak Ridge and Circle Drive, where there was sandwort and some hydrilla. The latter areas haven't had grass in years compared to their heyday.

"Blue Lake and San Patricio are coming back," Dowden said.

Lane Martin of Paulina and his two sons, Hunter and Jace, caught a whopping 30.59-pound best-five fish stringer on Toledo Bend.

Guide and former bass pro John Dean, who writes about Toledo Bend every month for Louisiana Sportsman, has said grass is making a comeback in some areas. Dean said that last fall and early this winter, he saw grass in areas where it has been missing, such as Indian Mounds, up in the drains, where there was milfoil, peppergrass and hydrilla.

**TURBIDITY
THE PAST
1 ½ YEARS
HAS BEEN MUCH,
MUCH HIGHER
THAN BEFORE.**

Also, he said, underwater vegetation was returning in Six Mile, Hog Pen (but it's deep, especially now) and some even in Housen Bay, which inexplicably was barren last year after it was so thick in

previous years.

And, like Dowden, Dean said grass is back in certain areas up the lake, starting at 1215.

"I call it 'bank grass.' In a lot of areas up there, it's starting to take hold. You can see it on the electronics easily," Dean said.

Some of his favorite areas on the Louisiana side, including Pirate's Cove, are devoid of underwater vegetation, as Dowden pointed out. But Dean said there is some very shallow peppergrass showing in Torro Bay.

The best hope is for a sustained low-water period after this winter and spring. When grass comes back, nutrients are enriched and recycled and the whole food chain benefits, Dowden said.

Baitfish fatten up, and bass go to the buffet table and grow to lunker proportions. That happened after the lake was drawn down in 2010 and after the drought in 2012.

Bass anglers can cross their fingers. ■



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After some advice from John Dean, Ralph Daigle cast around hay grass in 5-foot depth and caught this lunker on a Carolina-rigged black super fluke in Housen Bay.

HIGH WATER HAS TOLEDO BEND ON

Lots of shallow bass, headed to the spawn, should make March bass fishing great

When Ol' Man Winter is done huffing and puffing, blowing freezing temperatures and directing heavy rainfall at Toledo Bend, bass will settle down and do their thing like they always do in March.

I can't wait for March to get here. Ditto for so many other anglers who know when the female bass sit down on their beds — or move to and from them — bass fishing success on this lake is hard to beat anywhere. After a rainy, cold winter that kept the lake level high through late January, we need stable conditions and those bass will be ready to go.

Carolina-rigged soft plastics and wacky worms are the most consistent ways to put bedding bass in the boat. Moving baits such as lipless crankbaits, Chatterbait-style bladed jigs, spinnerbaits, crankbaits and jerkbaits still have their moments, but they usually take a back seat to the soft plastics, as proved every spring.

But let me put it this way: you don't want to put your search baits down.

Toledo Bend anglers will find high-water

conditions, I'm sure, this month. Bass were shallow in late January, and the movement will get more pronounced in late February and March. I guarantee you, they're going to be in doing their thing.

Plenty of water is in the bushes, and anglers who target the flooded buckbrush are salivating for the spawn. For the most part, the spawn happens in cycles, starting on the upper end, then mid-lake and eventually, the extreme lower end, where I've seen bass on beds into May.

In March, as the water warms, areas on and around main-lake points become just as productive as areas in the back of creeks, coves and shotgun pockets.

I'm going to rely heavily on Carolina rigs with Fluke-style baits, mostly Stanley U99s, plastic lizards and creature baits in 5- to 7-foot depths and wacky worms, dead-sticking the latter, during the height of the spawn. Top colors year-in and year-out are watermelon/red and green pumpkin/red.

How do I rig a Carolina rig? From the bottom up, I skin-hook whatever soft plastic I use with a 3/0 Gamakatsu EWG and tie it

to a 3-foot leader of either 15- or 17-pound fluorocarbon tied to 40-pound Power Pro braid, or I use braid from the hook all the way to the reel, depending on water clarity. The clearer the water, the more I choose to go with the fluorocarbon line.

I use a 3/4- or 1-ounce weight.

When the bass are on their beds and you're sight-fishing, offer a tube jig in addition to the wacky worm, which, truth be told, originated on this lake decades ago when someone put a hook through the middle of Nick Crème's Scoundrel. Or target prime spots – wood or beds – with a Neko Rig, which drops straight down with little sideways movement. Here's a tip: put a 1/32- or 1/64-ounce weight in the fat end of the soft plastic you use for the Neko Rig.

— John Dean



John Dean has been guiding on Toledo Bend most of his life. If you'd like to join him on a trip, give him a call at (936) 404-2688.

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Like most guys, Mike McCorkel of New Orleans works hard to make a living, and he puts in a lot of hours to do so. When an 11-day offshore hitch is finished, he's ready to do two things.

First, it's seeing his wife and children. Second, it's jumping into his bass boat and getting on the water somewhere.

McCorkel, originally from Houma, is quite familiar with the waters below Gibson. He regularly fishes out of Bob's Bayou Black Marina, and one of the regions he likes to fish during the latter part of the bass spawn in March is around and near Lake Penchant.

McCorkel and others who fish the Penchant region pretty much promise that you'll catch something, particularly when it comes to bass during the early spring when they're being amorous. Anglers will also catch hungry redfish on the prowl as water temperatures rise as winter disappears.

McCorkel fished the Penchant area in late March last year, along with Gerald Foulcard, his close friend from Patterson, and another fishermen. True to McCorkel's guarantee, they put a smackdown on aggressive largemouth bass in the dead-end canals around the lake.

For non-locals, getting to Lake Penchant is going to be either a long drive and short boat ride out of Dularge or just the opposite — a shorter drive and long boat ride from Gibson. Regardless of the logistics, the results will be the same once you get there.

THE CANAL CONNECTION
UP NEXT >

CANALS AROUND LAKE PENCHANT ARE FULL OF HUNGRY BASS AS SPAWNING SEASON TURNS ON IN MARCH.

Map Feature:

LAKE PENCHANT

By John Flores



RIGHT: Mike McCorkel with a good Pentchant largemouth and redfish. **BELOW:** Submerged grass, out away from the bank, always holds bass in the canals in the region.

THE CANAL CONNECTION

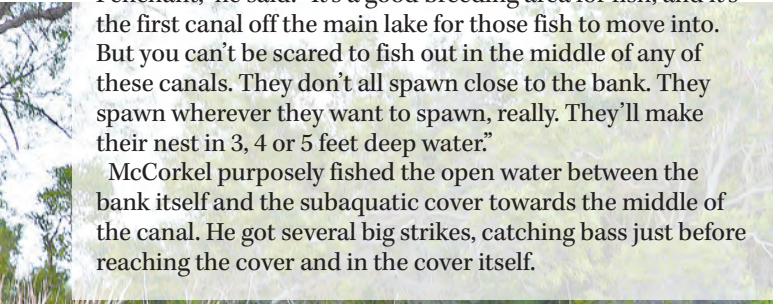
Lower Terrebonne Parish is teeming with canals, many of which are the primary spawning locations for largemouth bass. They include the Superior Canal near Lake Pentchant, the Union Oil Canal near the Bayou Decade intersection, the Lil Deuce canals near Lake Decade, and Big Fish Canal near Bayou La Loutra near Jug Lake.

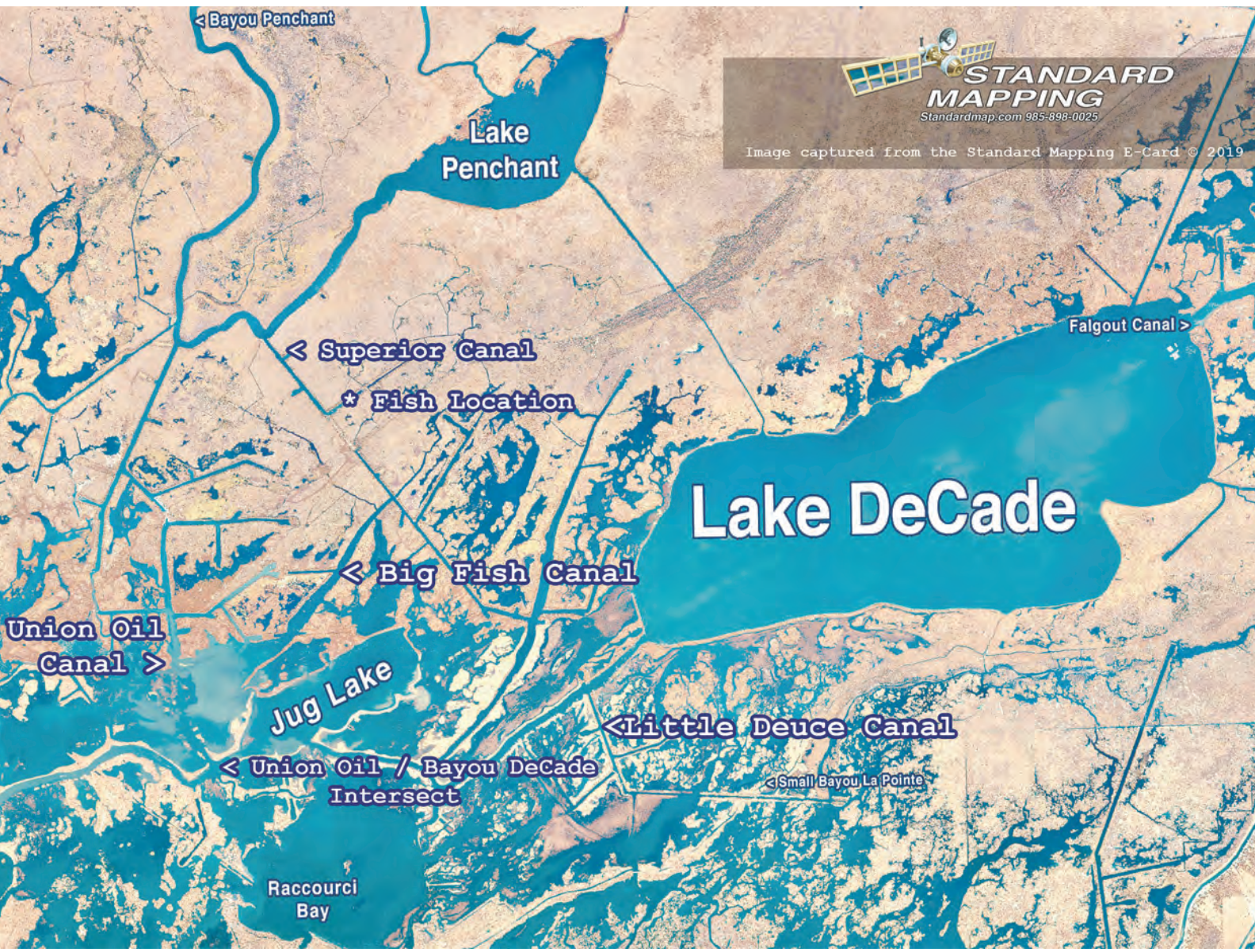
Discussing the bass connection these canals have with Lake Pentchant, Jug Lake and Lade Decade, McCorkel said, “This is a pretty big spawning area. You have fish coming off Lake Pentchant and these other lakes moving into these canals to do their thing: spawn. The canals are 4 to 5 feet deep, where the fish we target are just off the bank typically in 1½ to 2 feet of water. The depth make them ideal spawn and post-spawn locations.”

Starting out in the Superior Canal, it became quite evident McCorkel knew what he was talking about. In the first 300 to 500 yards, by fishing isolated cover off the bank, five fish that would have been tournament keepers came to the boat. One of the things McCorkel noticed was the bites were not directly off the bank itself, but instead 10 feet and further away.

“The Superior Canal is an oil-field canal off of Lake Pentchant,” he said. “It’s a good breeding area for fish, and it’s the first canal off the main lake for those fish to move into. But you can’t be scared to fish out in the middle of any of these canals. They don’t all spawn close to the bank. They spawn wherever they want to spawn, really. They’ll make their nest in 3, 4 or 5 feet deep water.”

McCorkel purposely fished the open water between the bank itself and the subaquatic cover towards the middle of the canal. He got several big strikes, catching bass just before reaching the cover and in the cover itself.





“Cover off the bank always seems (to be) a better target in the Penchant area,” McCorkel said. “You may have to make four or five casts to it, but there’s going to be fish in it.”

The canals also offer structure below the surface, where production platforms are present. Shallow-water platforms have plenty of pylons under suspended walkways and the platforms themselves.

McCorkel flips baits with precise accuracy. The shallow-water platforms provide shade and cover over bass beds and the pylons that support the structures make excellent targets for baits.

On more than one occasion, McCorkel hooked and landed chunky 3-pound marsh bass while retrieving a spinnerbait from under the platforms, between the legs.

McCorkle also recommends the Pit Canal just north of Lake Penchant, Liners Ditch on the south side of Lake Penchant and old Turtle Bayou on the Dularge side.

SUGGESTED BAITS UP NEXT >





Smaller baits are more productive on spring bass in the canals around Lake Pentchant because of the size of the available forage.

SUGGESTED BAITS

On his trip to the Pentchant area last spring, McCorkel's bait choices were plastic frogs, weightless plastics, spinnerbaits and Chatterbaits. Towards noon, when the sun was high and the bite possibly slowing down, he switched to flipping jigs on cuts where bayous crossed canals.

Foulcard prefers finesse baits in the canals. He fished a weightless Senko and a ¼-ounce Cajun Boss spinnerbait in G-Man color (black/yellow skirt). He also prefers to fish small crankbaits like Bandits in baby bass or Tennessee shad colors.

"I go smaller simply to match the hatch at this time of year," Foulcard said. "A lot of small fry are swimming around, which makes smaller sometimes more attractive to fish because that's what they see. But I'll also fish a little deeper with a Zoom Speed Craw or use small creature baits on secondary dropoffs or along the deeper side of grass lines like we fished in the Pentchant area canals. I do that because most of the postspawn bass tend to go a little deeper."

McCorkel said he also liked to match the size and color of the baitfish present.

"When I use a spinnerbait or Chatterbait, I'll use primarily perch colors, because we're essentially targeting spawning and postspawn bass in the latter part of March," he said. "So I'm going to imitate a perch or some sort of panfish the bass will react to. Colors like green pumpkin and watermelon seed with a tint of chartreuse are good colors this time of year. A Chatterbait is like a spinnerbait on steroids. It has so much vibration and so much action, bass can't stand it."

COASTAL TACTICS, METHODS UP NEXT >



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COASTAL TACTICS AND METHODS

According to both McCorkel and Foulcard, how you fish this region in late March is important, too.

"It's important at this time of year not to fish too fast," McCorkel said. "A lot of people come around here and put their trolling motor on high and cut across the canal and make four or five casts and leave. I think this particular time of year, you want to slow it down, make repeated casts and take your time. Don't go blazing through the area at 100 miles per hour. Slow it down, take your time and be accurate with your casts."

McCorkel said 90 percent of the time, he fishes with either 50-pound Power Pro braid or 15-pound Trilene fluorocarbon. He feels like there is a learning curve associated with fluorocarbon, but once mastered, the line's advantage is strength combined with sensitivity.

Essentially, McCorkel said in heavy vegetation, his go-to line is braid. In other situations, like casting in open or real clear water, he uses fluorocarbon.

"You have to be versatile with lures and presentation to entice a tired and worn out, postspawn bass to eat,"



Foulcard said. "So unless you're getting bit, my advice is to scale down and slow down your presentation."

Besides a good number of bass, McCorkel got hammered by a decent redfish in one of location canals he fished. The hungry red gobbled up and swallowed his Chatterbait-style bait made by Wicked Lures he was using.

Besides bass, it's not uncommon to catch redfish in the canals associated with the brackish-water marshes below Gibson and Dularge. In fact, most anglers familiar with the region who fish it regularly go with the attitude they're going to catch something. And that's not just hoping, it's a promise. ■

BELOW: The Bayou Decade/ Union Canal intersection is a popular fishing location.



John Flores was enticed in 1984 to leave New Mexico for the Sportsman's Paradise by his wife, Christine. Never looking back, he spends much of his free time writing about and photographing the state's natural resources.



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HACKNEY'S HIGH-WATER TIPS

When spring reservoirs and river systems are a-flood, here's how a top-drawer bass pro responds.

BY DON SHOOPMAN

Greg Hackney isn't intimidated by high-water conditions or even flooding when he fishes for bass in the spring.

A 45-year-old pro bass fisherman from Gonzales, Hackney has enough confidence and experi-

ence to get bass to bite under those conditions. Based on the way the table's being set for late February and March, high water or flooding will be the norm in many bassing locales across Louisiana, including major river systems and Toledo Bend.

>



Greg Hackney said high water spreads bass out, and finding a concentration of fish can be difficult.

Those conditions make bass harder to find, Hackney, the 2014 B.A.S.S. Angler of the Year, admitted. He said such conditions are easier to overcome on a reservoir than in a river system where the overflow spreads out. At times, it can be like finding a needle in a haystack.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Hackney said the key is to find and fish the highest spots in a reservoir or river system.

At Toledo Bend, for example, he said a prime place to target spawning bass is clean ground covered by rising water in a stand of pine trees providing shade in an area that has no brush. Also, look for flooded clear cuts or fire lanes where sunlight penetrates. Otherwise, he said, target inundated bushes and buck brush, keeping an eye out for a big tupelo gum or cypress tree in the bushes or, if there isn't one, a bush that sticks out from others.

In the Atchafalaya Basin or similar river systems, find high spots that aren't affected by the current. After all, the Mississippi River starts in



Great soft-plastic baits to present bass in flooded conditions are (top to bottom): a Strike King rodent, a Strike King flipping tube and a Strike King Sexy Frog.



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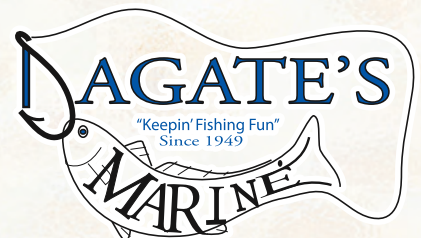
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Minnesota and winds through the heart of the country to the lower end of the Sportsman's Paradise, he pointed out. That flowing water is as cold as ice, or close to it, so get away from it, he advised, noting that high spots will warm more quickly.

Often under those conditions, he's had success traveling to the lowest part of the spillway, or he fishes on the Stephenville side, the Lake Verret area.

WHEN TO GO

During the spring spawn, bass anglers "don't have to be out there at the crack of daylight" for obvious reasons, Hackney said. Of course, the air temperature is colder at sunrise, but once the sun gets high in the sky, the water temperature climbs.

"Roll out about 9," he said. "Afternoon's the best. The warmer the water, the better the bite."

If you do fish in the early hours of the day, he said, make slower presentations to the bass.

WHAT TO THROW

A horizontal bait such as a white Hack Attack spinnerbait is his favorite while bass are on the move before and after the spawn.

When bass "lock down" to spawn, they "guard the ground," so pitching and flipping are effective. Females stick around longer when the water is in the high 50s or low 60s. If it's warmer, the girls tend to leave earlier. Hackney's go-to baits at this stage are a Strike King Rodent, Strike King Rage Bug, Strike King Lizard and Strike King Flippin' Tube.

After eggs hatch and the fry are high in the water column, it's time to offer a KVD Sexy Frog or a Hack Attack Pad Perch and a Strike King buzzbait. You know it's time to throw those topwaters when the gnats are bugging you to no end, it's humid with no wind and the barometric pressure's low, he said.

THE TOP COLORS

Water color is everything in picking the color of a soft-plastic bait for high-water situations.

Odds are, water in the backs of creeks at Toledo Bend and in many other areas are stained in March. Hackney goes strictly with black/neon soft plastics. When the water's brown, he likes brown.

"You want a bait to look natural. You want bait to look like you see swimming in the water," he said.

When the water is clearer, he turns to green pumpkin and Alabama bug.

However, Hackney also said he has caught bass on Strike King's "doubleheader" colored soft plastics "in every state that bass exist." It's half watermelon/red and half green pumpkin. ■



Don Shoopman is an outdoorsman who fishes for freshwater and saltwater species mostly in and around the Atchafalaya Basin and Vermilion Bay. Don, who moved to the Sportsman's Paradise from Missouri in 1976, and his wife June Boutte Shoopman live in New Iberia. They have two grown sons.



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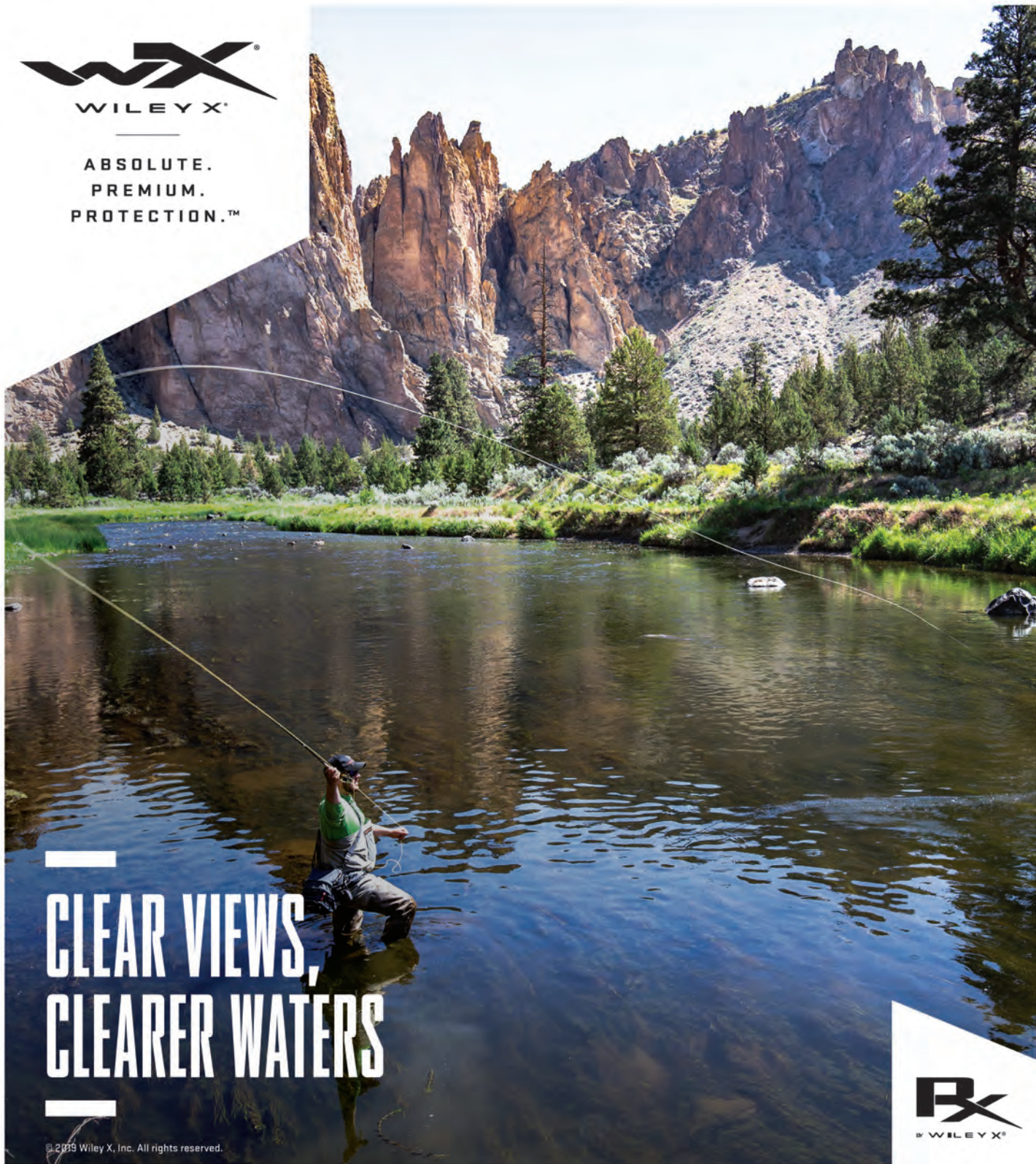
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How to **FIND GRASS THAT HOLDS PRESPAWN BASS**

Look for prespawn bass to stage anywhere there's aquatic grass this month, then break down those areas for great fishing.

By David A. Brown

The Green Room; it's where the stars hang out and enjoy tasty snacks before their big performance. Same deal with bass staging for the spawn; they'll spend a lot of time packing their bellies while lounging in nature's green room — aquatic grass.

Okay, hay grass is more of a golden brown deal, but the Green Room allusion fits, nonetheless — par-

ticularly with hydrilla, which comprises the most-common prespawn staging feature. Here, hungry bass find not only the food they need — shad, bluegill, crawfish — but also warmth in the still-chilly water and the ability to belly down and relax before the onset of what will be the most stressful period of their years.

FIND THE HOT SPOTS

Having moved from their winter patterns, these plump prespawners are now making their way toward the maternity ward. It might seem like a random rumble, but nature has programmed the fish to proceed with prudence; their course will follow discernible clues.

THE DITCH — Creek arms and spawning pockets all have a main channel meandering into the shallows. These grass-lined travel routes guide fish along the same course year after year. Focus your efforts on these arteries, and you'll stay on target.

THE STANDALONES — Early grass growth often appears in clumpy form, as the vegetation gradually regenerates after winter die-off. Pay attention to your electronics and note the likely bass attractors. Mark these key spots and know that success may require multiple visits during a day. Sunlight, wind and bait movement will determine how fish set up, so if a spot looks promising, give it several opportunities to produce.

THE HAY WILL PLAY — Hay grass (aka "Johnson grass") often grows outside the mouths of spawning area, so give this vivid, emergent grass a good look as you hunt down those prespawners. Offering strategic vertical edges, stands of hay grass often present points, cuts and contour features, much like a hard shoreline. Pay attention to these anomalies, as food-focused fish will certainly use them to their advantage.

With any of these grass scenarios, once you've established a productive or promising area, don't get distracted. Sure, you may flip one up from a nearby stump, and docks are always high-percentage spots; but stay on point and you'll fare better.





Bladed jigs are great lures to fish around aquatic vegetation for bass.

BEST BAITS

Crawfish haven't left the menu yet, but prespawn fish are far more focused on baitfish, so rake that grass with lures designed to mimic this profile. Soft-plastic swimbaits offer a strong choice, but consider your rigging options: jigheads for lower grass and deeper water; weighted wide-gap hooks for denser vegetation and/or shallow water.

Crankbaits are also standard issue for early spring fishing, and prespawn grass can really show off their allure. Keep a lipless bait and a square-bill on stand-by and alternate between

the two to snag and rip through the grass for aggression reaction bites.

Another good one: the bladed jig. Vibration, flash, lively sound — they all trigger prespawners lounging in the grass. Try different trailers — swimbaits, creature baits, stick worms — to see what profile earns those feeding responses.

The one option that few want to admit they use, but many actually do is the Alabama rig. The major bass tournament circuits ban the Alabama rig, but most regional trails allow it. For the average Joe, it's a must-have

for the prespawn season, as a cluster of baits resembles the pods of shad these big fish are seeking.

Also, an Alabama rig is as user-friendly as it gets — just cast and wind. But consider a couple of performance points. First, run slightly heavier swimbait heads on the bottom two arms to keep the rig tracking true. Also, run a larger swimbait, maybe in a different color, in the center "target" spot. This is where most fish attack, so give 'em an enticing look.



Grass beds are productive areas for targeting prespawn bass; they offer protection and ambush opportunities.

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The secret for success during spawning season is hitting as many trees as quickly as possible.

Veteran Guide tells **WHERE TO FISH FOR BIG BASS ON CADDO LAKE**

By Jerald Horst

Follow this expert's advice and you might end up with a beast of a bass from this border lake.

You could definitely feel it in the air; the cool, damp fog of early morning had that rich fish smell, the overpowering scent of what fertile waters hold in the spring, particularly largemouth bass, sway-bellied, spawning females, to be more specific.

Paul Keith of Caddo Guide Service was in charge that morning. He has a reputation for pulling big, sow bass out of Caddo Lake's expansive cypress brakes. It was March, and the big green fish were on the prod — the spawn was coming quickly.

Keith started casting 50 feet from the boat launch.

"There are fish everywhere in the lake," he said. "But some places are better than others."

Keith (318-455-3437) fishes the

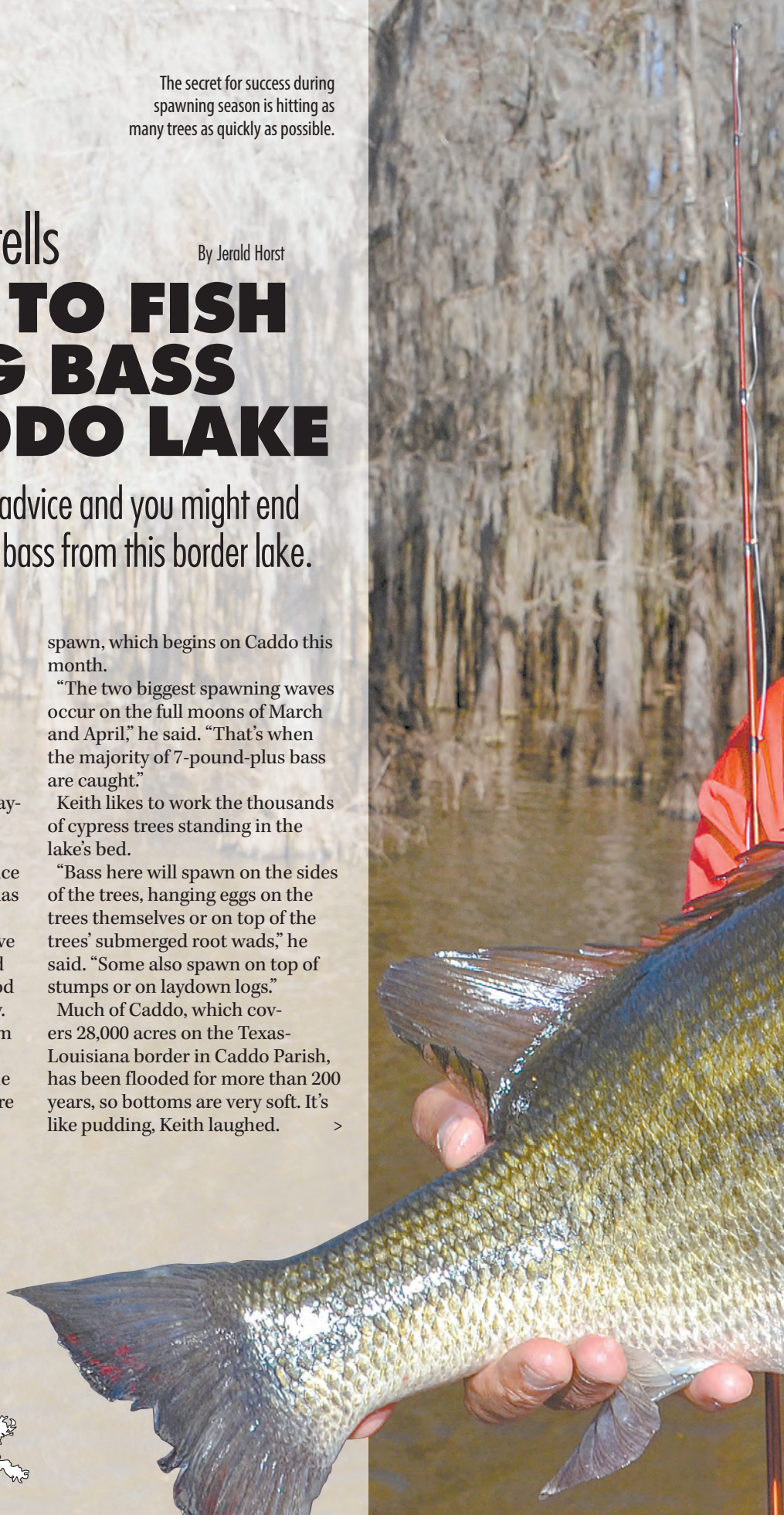
spawn, which begins on Caddo this month.

"The two biggest spawning waves occur on the full moons of March and April," he said. "That's when the majority of 7-pound-plus bass are caught."

Keith likes to work the thousands of cypress trees standing in the lake's bed.

"Bass here will spawn on the sides of the trees, hanging eggs on the trees themselves or on top of the trees' submerged root wads," he said. "Some also spawn on top of stumps or on laydown logs."

Much of Caddo, which covers 28,000 acres on the Texas-Louisiana border in Caddo Parish, has been flooded for more than 200 years, so bottoms are very soft. It's like pudding, Keith laughed. >





"A fish can fan forever and never fan out a spawning bed," said Keith, who fishes mostly in 2 to 3 feet of water during the spawning season. "Lots of times, I will have to tilt my big motor and raise my trolling motor, too, and I'll still be turning a mud trail. Get as shallow as you can. If you ain't leaving a mud trail, you ain't catching fish."

Keith started throwing a bladed jig but didn't get bit right away — it worked later in the day — so he decided to throw something that would drop vertically — a Senko or an unweighted swimbait. A 5-inch, black/blue V&M Thunder Shad worked like a charm.

"I like it because you can let it fall vertically or you can swim it," he said. "My choice of lures depends on the fish. Some days, they want to chase things; some days they don't."

Keith uses a variety of lures for spring bass fishing, including a V&M J-Bug (creature bait), a V&M Pacemaker (swim jig), 6- and 9-inch lizards, Senko-type baits, bladed jigs

and Booyah spinnerbaits with two copper blades. Preferred colors run to the dark side: black, black/blue, black/red and junebug. For "moving baits" like spinnerbaits, swim jigs and bladed jigs, he will also use bream colors.

Fishing in the trees demands versatility. Keith will flip; he will cast underhand, overhand and sidearm. He used every technique aside from cane-poling to deliver his lure as close to each tree trunk he targeted — but he was quiet.

"Quietness in presentation is very important, especially when it's calm," Keith said. "Avoid big splashes. Lay the bait in there as quietly as possible."

Keith likes a breezy day.

"A little wind creates a current, it breaks up light and shadows, and it cuts down having to be super-quiet. When I look out there in the morning and see it's slick, I go 'Huuh,'" he grunted.

Before noon arrived, Keith had horsed one big bass after another off the cypress trees.

That's what Caddo Lake is about," he said as he lipped a 6-pounder. His two largest that morning were 6.6 and 6.7 pounds.

SEASONAL CADDO PATTERNS

Caddo is shaped like a scorpion astride the Louisiana-Texas border, with the tail of the scorpion in Texas and the claws in the Bayou State and roughly half the water and the 220 miles of shoreline are in each state.

continued >

6 TIPS FOR NEWCOMERS

Guide Paul Keith offered up six tips to newcomers for succeeding with Caddo's big, spring bass.

- Pick a small area of the lake and learn it. Don't try to fish the whole lake.
- Think shallow.
- Think cypress trees.
- Keep moving. Cover lots of water quickly. At most, each of two men in a boat should throw once at each tree. Keith will hit 500 trees by himself to try and present his baits to more fish.
- Make accurate casts close to target trees.
- Charter a guide the first time here, especially for the first day if you're on a multi-day trip.

BELOW: Paul Keith used every casting technique known to deliver his lures as close to standing trees as possible. **INSET:** This bucketmouth inhaled a black and blue swim bait.



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By any definition, it is heavily forested, with sometimes dense, island-like brakes standing in the shallow waters. The Texas end of the lake is more densely treed than the Louisiana end, but both hold a lot of standing timber.

The lake is shallow. Keith estimates its average depth at only 4 feet.

"We do have creek beds that are 8 to 20 feet deep, but bass don't relate to them in the spring."

As a professional guide, Keith fishes year-round. Here is what he does in the other seasons.

• **Summer.** Keith likes to throw Flukes, soft swimbaits and frogs in lily pads, milfoil, duckweed mats and especially beds of hydrilla and coontail. Locating this

vegetation is easy with some scouting. He also likes to punch dense vegetation, such matted hydrilla often associated with salvinia. For this, he likes to use one-ounce or heavier, beaver-style baits or jigs in dark colors. He also fishes weed lines or dropoffs in creek beds with Texas-rigged worms in watermelon or other dark colors.

• **Fall.** Bass begin to school-up in creeks. Keith likes to throw topwater lures like clear Zara Spook Puppies or Tiny Torpedos. He also uses white or shad-colored Flukes. Late fall is also the beginning of Alabama-rig season.

• **Winter.** Keith will continue to use some topwaters in the winter, but Alabama-rig fishing is in full swing. He

will add medium-running, shad-colored crankbaits to his repertoire, as well as vertical-jigging chrome Strata spoons such.

Fishing is mostly done in or near the deeper waters of creeks. Keith will stay with his winter patterns until water temperatures rise into the low 50s, then he moves in the shallows in the trees for spring spawning season fishing.

COUNT AND MEASURE

Louisiana fishermen used to keeping a 10-fish limit of any size largemouth bass will have to retrain themselves to meet the limits that apply to Caddo, which is a 14- to 18-inch slot limit; fish between those lengths must be released. The slot



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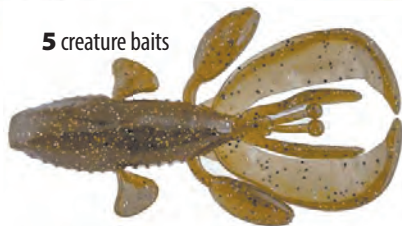
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4 lizards



5 creature baits



6 Senkos



7 swimbaits

Paul Keith uses a wide variety of spring spawning baits for bass, including from opposite page: Chatterbaits, spinnerbaits and jigs; **THIS PAGE:** lizards, creature baits, Senkos, and swimbaits. Notice that all are dark colored.

limit does not apply to spotted bass, which have no minimum size.

Anglers are allowed to keep a combined limit of eight largemouth and spotted bass, but only four of the eight can be more than 18 inches long.

A benefit of the uniform regulations is that the invisible state line crossing the middle of the lake is unimportant. Additionally, anglers from either state can trailer their boats to the other state to launch, needing only their home state's fishing license to do so.

STICKS, STRINGS AND GADGETS

When it comes to equipment, Keith is particular, but then again, he isn't. He likes stout rods, medium-heavy to heavy action 7-foot Lew's baitcasting outfits, the Super Duty reels having a 7.5-to-1 gear ratio.

"You need them to pull some of the toads out of all the sticks here," he said. "I even have some extra-heavy rods (he humorously calls them 'mop sticks') for punching in the summer."

As for lines, he isn't a fluorocarbon kind of guy.

"It's not needed here; we don't have clear water," said Keith, who uses 17-pound Gamma or Sunline monofilament.

When he is punching through grass mats, throwing a frog in vegetation or chunking an Alabama rig, he will shift to 30- or 50-pound braid, but he is quick to add that one can do what he needs to in the spring using a spinning reel.

"Seventy percent of my customers don't fish regularly,

and they use spinning reels here," he said. "If you like a spinning reel and are good with it, you can get the lure where you want it better than with a baitcaster. It's harder to skip a lure in place with a baitcaster.

"Accuracy is everything out here in the spring. If you are not getting your bait in

right next to the tree — for sure within 1 foot — you are wasting your time. I'd rather have a person throw the wrong bait, in the wrong color and work it wrong, but get it next to a tree than do everything right except getting it close to the tree."

continued >

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CADDO LAKE BASS

One thing that Keith has very little use for on Caddo is electronics. “They are of limited use here. If I didn’t have a graph on the boat, I wouldn’t miss it in the spring,” he said. Keith measures the depth he’s fishing by dropping the lure from the rod tip to the bottom. Spring fishing is in water less than 4 feet deep. “The most that I use electronics is in the fall and winter, when I look for balls of shad in creek beds,” he said.

KEYS TO SPAWNING BASS

“My key to success in Caddo Lake is covering a lot of water quickly, especially during spawning season,” Keith said. “Because there are so many trees, you may have to hit 50 or 100 trees between bites.

“Everything on this lake looks fishy, but like any lake, not everywhere holds numbers of fish.”

Although there are fish in both parts of the lake, he feels strongly that the Texas side is better for big bass for several reasons. First, it has more cover. The number of trees spreads out the boat pressure.

“The fish are less beat-up,” he said.

Texas also has a stronger Florida bass-stocking program.

“Launching anywhere in Louisiana, a fisherman in an average bass boat can be on the Texas side in 5 to 10 minutes,” he said.

Caddo Lake is not a sight-fishing lake for

Special size and creel limits apply to anglers of both states when fishing in Caddo Lake.

bass on their beds because the water is so stained and tannic, he said.

“Even in clear water, you can’t see their beds here,” he said. “It’s like looking down into coffee or tea.”

Accuracy is as important as speed in fishing Caddo during the spawn. He places every cast as close as possible to a tree trunk, preferably slightly beyond it. He allows his lure to drop, swims it 5 feet, then speed-retrieves it back for the next cast.

“It’s all about getting to that next tree to make another cast,” he emphasized.

Keith is a strong supporter of Bass Life Associates out of Shreveport. The group provides replica mounts for released largemouth bass weighing 8 pounds or more. Keith has caught 72 bass bigger than 8 pounds certified by Bass Life Associates. Fifteen of these were over 10 pounds, and his personal best is 13.72 pounds. ■



Jerald Horst is a retired LSU professor of fisheries. He is an active writer, book author and outdoorsman. He may be reached at jerald@rockinghorst.com.

TAKE CARE

While Paul Keith encourages anglers looking for trophy bass to fish the Texas side of the lake, the recommendation comes with a caution.

“There are lots of stumps and some very shallow sandbars in this already shallow lake,” he said. “What you want to do is run your boat in boat lanes marked with markers. Each marker pole has a metal plate with numbers and letters on it that coincide coordinate with paper maps.

“Stay on the side of the post that the metal marker plate points toward. Then, when you reach your fishing area, slow down to leave the boat lane.” ■

Following marked boat lanes is critical for travel on Caddo Lake. The lane is on the side of the post towards which the metal marker plate is pointed.





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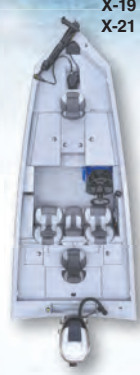
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Different models of soft-plastic frogs have their own, built-in advantages. **INSET:** Use a frog as a basic search bait in spring.

FROG TACTICS

TRY THIS GREAT SEARCH BAIT By David A. Brown

Spring brings several promises, among them: bass will eat a frog. With fish shaking off winter's chill and moving toward their spawning locations, gobbling as much protein as possible is paramount.

For an angler, the frog offers a great search bait for covering lots of water and finding key staging areas. Once you're dialed in, the frog is an easy bait with which to hit your targets.

Make the most of this high-percentage bait by paying attention to these key points.

BODY STYLES

No need to complicate this; a traditional, narrow-nose frog comes through cover best and does the best job of creating taunting displays with its subtle side-to-side twitches. When noise and splash weigh heavier in the priorities, a popping frog's concave face chugs, spits and produces a substantial bubble trail. A walking

frog needs relatively calm conditions for open-water use, while poppers perform just fine in a chop.

Specialized frogs with baitfish/panfish shapes designed to ride sideways in the water enhance the basic frog image with a forage fish ruse.

COLORS

Modern frog colors run the gamut from authentic bullfrog, to more eye-popping artistic options. Matching local forage can make a difference, so take note of any live frogs you spot and do your best to mimic their appearance.

Blacks and browns do remarkably well, but savvy anglers know that one of the most popular frog colors is white. Some say it looks like a baitfish belly from the viewpoint of a bass, but in thick weeds or dim light, anglers can visually track a white frog better. Sometimes bass quietly suck down a frog, so when the white disappears, it's time to



LEG WORK

Most frogs come standard with a set of long leg strands and, at times, this is what you want. For example, a bass may have trouble eyeballing a clean shot at your bait through a grass mat; but if he grabs those long legs, he has a better chance of sucking in the entire frog.

Conversely, when a frog's legs drag too much in open water, this may impede the walking motion. In such cases, trim a

quarter-inch at a time until you find the right length for optimal action.

For strategic effect, trim one side a half-inch shorter to make the bait swing more widely to the longer side. On the subsequent swing, that fuller side holds the frog to a shorter swing. Often, a small difference between your frog and others can be the deal closer on a pressured fishery.

OPEN UP

If you're missing too many frog bites or your fish keep shaking loose, bend the hooks outward for a wider grabbing range. In heavier cover, this broader reach obviously works against you, so keep the hooks tucked close to the frog's body and check the alignment after every fish.

FILL THE BELLY

Enhancing your frog with rattles (additional) can help you attract attention from afar. Simply remove the skirt legs, push rattle chambers through the holes and replace the legs. Also, adding lead BBs to a frog's belly makes it sit lower in the water — often advantageous when working over grass mats.

PRESENTATION PROWESS

Overhead casts are the norm, but side-arm shots help you hit those shade pockets created by overhanging tree limbs, vines, etc. Sidearm casts will also serve you well for dock fishing when skipping your frog into the dark-and-dangerous.

Additionally, we typically associate the pitching presentation with jigs and Texas-rigged plastics, but this delivery style can also work well when you're sending your frog into a tight area.

THE RIGHT RESPONSE

You can chose a goofy colored frog, throw one with raggedy legs and even work it home with a boring, straight line retrieve and still attract a bass. Right place, right time — it happens. However, regardless of how you tempted a fish into biting, this is without question the most important element of the game.

Truly a make-it-or-break-it moment, the proper hookset for a topwater frog bite requires a discipline that's often greatly impeded by the magnitude of the



One of the most popular frog colors is white.

David Brown

moment. You make your cast, work the bait, twitch-twitch-twitch-twitch-twitch-BOOM! Big splash, muscles clinch, eye widen; but what do you do?

Nothing — at least not for a second or two. Fact is, the majority of missed frog bites are not the fish's fault. Sure, they miss the bait sometimes, but anglers yank away their target more often than not. It's completely understandable, but the sooner you can train yourself to forego that immediate rod yank and simply let the fish come tight on your line before crossing his eyes, the more frog fish you're going to catch. ■

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LURE REVIEW

Don Shoopman



TIE ON A BLACK LABEL

MISSISSIPPI PRO'S HAND-CRAFTED Balsa CRANKBAITS ARE SQUARE-BILLED, BASS-CATCHING CREATIONS

Cliff Pace's Ricochet Jr. crankbait is a square-billed balsa plug that's dynamite on bass.

Artist at work. That's what a sign should read in the shop at Cliff Pace's home in Petal, Miss., where he makes the Black Label balsa crankbaits that have been catching bass from the Atchafalaya Basin and Lake Verret in south-central Louisiana to waters in neighboring states and across the United States.

His craft is a labor of love, a hobby that blossomed into a business while he maintains a high profile as an accomplished professional bass angler.

"I do various things in the tackle industry," Pace said, including providing lead casting for leadheads in spinnerbaits, vibrating jigs and jigs, among other things, and distributing his handmade balsa crankbaits

"I've been building lures my whole life. I was building these just for me. Ten or 12 years ago, there weren't a lot of great square-billed crankbaits on the market.

About 2014, I started building them for myself," said Pace, 28.

They have been effective many times in Louisiana, including a tournament a few years ago in the Atchafalaya Basin when Pace used a Ricochet Jr. model around cypress trees to catch many of the bass he weighed in a Bassmaster Central Open in which he finished 12th with 32 pounds, 15 ounces.

Now Pace is taking his game and his Black Label balsa crankbaits to the new Major League Fishing Bass Pro Tour this year.

"There's a big difference between a balsa crankbait and a plastic crankbait. There's definitely a time and place for both," he said.

When it's time for a balsa crankbait, Pace and the rest of the world's bass anglers can tie on the Black Label balsa.

"I've used them throughout my career, even before Black Label existed," he said. "A lot of people over the years, I'd give

the bait to who wanted them. A lot of people saw them or borrowed one, or I gave them to a tight-knit group of people. Since then, it has grown. A lot of tackle stores started carrying them. I do enjoy building these, and I enjoy the feedback from fishermen."

And there has been plenty of positive reaction to the Black Label balsa crankbaits since they went on the market in 2014. The line includes the Ricochet and Ricochet Jr., the CBS2 and CBS2 and Slim crankbaits, and the Tease, a topwater bait with twin props.

Pace gets his balsa wood from South America. The baits, he said, are all different in reaction and shape "to fit the fishing conditions you come across for different times of the year," noting his favorite is probably the Ricochet Jr.

Pace makes it clear the balsa crankbaits aren't hand-carved, although he used to carve his own back in the day. However, after they are cut from a machine, each

of the next 50-plus steps are in his hands.

First, he drills a hole and inserts a ballast weight. Then, he seals the bait completely. After that, he applies a primary base coat of white paint.

If he is painting a bold bluegill pattern, a popular color combination, the process — sprayed with Polytranspor airbrush paint — begins with a scale pattern through a mesh. The bait is sprayed with chartreuse top to bottom, leaving the belly white, and an orange throat is applied under the nose.

After that, he sprays baby blue on the cheeks, then uses a stencil for the tell-tale vertical bream bars. He applies brown paint down the center of the back, followed by an iridescent green scale effect over the brown, a stencil to make the black gill and then a center black line down the length of the back.

After eyes are applied, the final application is the target dot on the side.

Then the O-rings and premium black nickel treble hooks are added to complete the balsa crank bait.

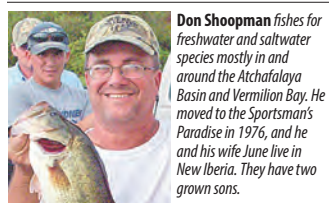
For those who want to watch the painting process, go to <https://youtu.be/pDg-8fZEnoyU>.

It's a painstaking process that takes 14 days, start to finish, to allow paint to dry. In a two-week period, without interruption, he can build approximately 500 baits. He builds them between tournaments and during the offseason. With a jam-packed schedule in March, none will be built.

"All in all, when compared to most balsa baits, they're very durable. They're built to be as durable as I can possibly make them," he said.

Also of interest, the wire harness that runs through the body is stainless steel, so it won't rust, he said.

For more information, visit www.blacklabetackle.com. ■



Don Shoopman fishes for freshwater and saltwater species mostly in and around the Atchafalaya Basin and Vermilion Bay. He moved to the Sportsman's Paradise in 1976, and he and his wife June live in New Iberia. They have two grown sons.



COLOR MY WORLD:

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THUMP THAT TREE FOR MARCH SLABS

By Kinny Haddox

Don't be afraid to drop a bait or lure right next to a tree when crappie are making their big move to the shallows to spawn. Rub the bark, and you might get a bite.

Steve Danna slowly circled the lone cypress tree with the concentration of a lion sizing up its prey — looking for spawning crappie.

He began by swimming one of his favorite lures, a soft-plastic Bobby Garland bait in Cajun cricket color, around the outer edges of the tree, covering every side while gently raising and lowering the jig to cover several different depths.

The first pass yielded nothing. Danna moved closer and changed to one of his hand-tied hair jigs: a red head with a blue/chartreuse body. This time, he dropped the jig right on the edge of the tree, letting it slowly fall as close to the tree as possible and working it even under the lower branches. The second time he dropped it, he got what he was after.

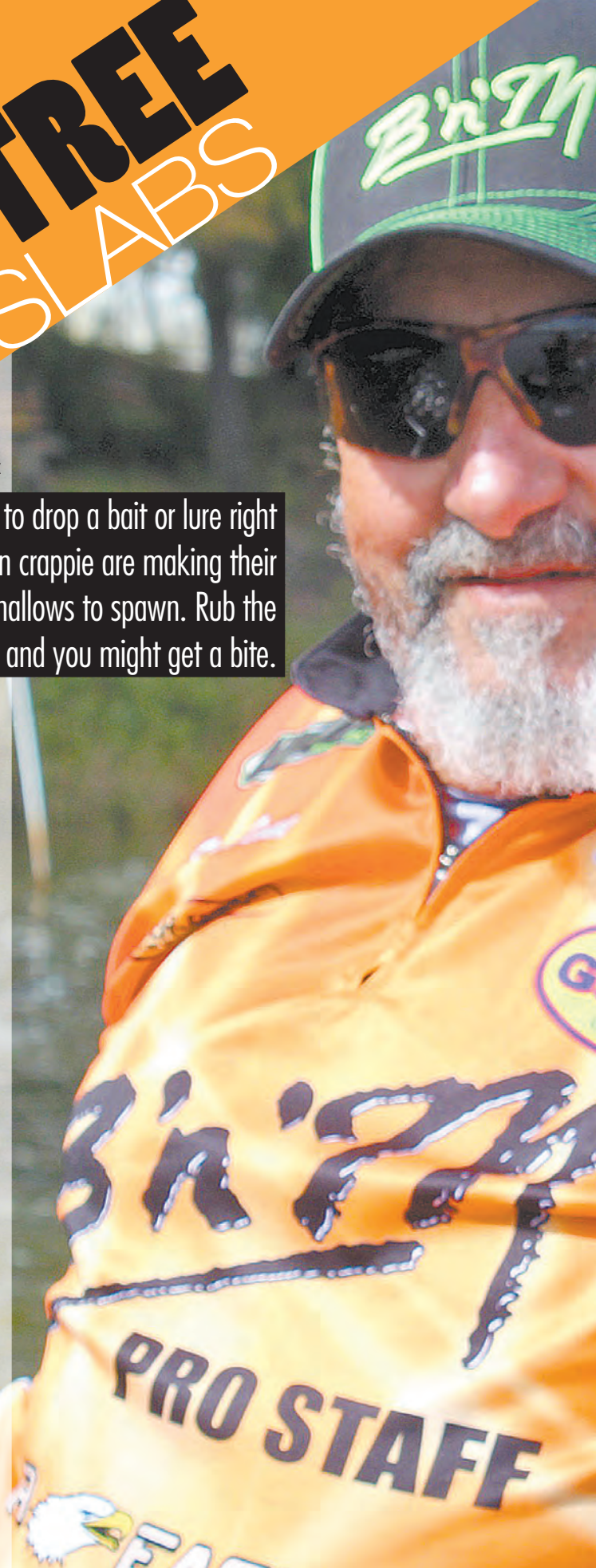
Thump.

That “thump” is the signature feel of a crappie that makes even veteran anglers experience a sudden rise in blood pressure. Danna lifted the crappie into the boat and dropped the lure back in the same place with the same result. Before he left the tree, he had three good fish — every one of them bit so close to the tree that many anglers would have missed the opportunity because they wouldn't have been so determined.

“There are dozens of proven techniques to successfully catch crappie,” Danna said. “But none of them beat the thrill of the thump — actually holding a pole in your hand, tight-lining a jig and feeling the crappie take the bait. That signature thump is what it is all about for me. It's my favorite way to catch crappie.”

This time of year, you might as well forget calling Danna by his real name. Just call him “Tree Thumper”. That's because he is probably out chasing crappie, and he's using his tree-hugging technique to catch them.

FISH IN THE TREES UP NEXT >







FISH IN THE TREES

Late February and the month of March are times when you'll often hear whispered conversations among veteran crappie anglers include the phrase, "They're on the trees." That means crappie are beginning to move shallow, are making nests and laying eggs at the base of cypress and tupelo gum trees.

It drives fishermen like Danna to not only fish around the trees, but up in them. Some even pull up into the trees and have one person hold onto the limbs while another works a jig down into places that seem impossible to penetrate with a lure. The tougher the presentation seems, the more successful the bite. That's because the tighter you fish the tree, the more likely you are putting your bait where nobody has already fished,

and where a female crappie is often going to spawn and male crappie are going to stand guard until the eggs hatch.

The best thing about "tree thumping" in Louisiana is that it works on almost every lake you can imagine, from riverine lakes like Concordia and Bruin to big reservoirs like D'Arbonne and Bistineau and smaller lakes like Black Bayou and Caddo. If the fish move from deeper to shallow water to spawn, and if there are stands of cypress or tupelo gum trees, this is a technique that will supply your fish fry.

Danna said the way to find and catch tree thumpers hasn't changed. Early in the season, he picks out trees with a southerly exposure because they seem to warm up first. He finds crappie in small bunches of trees more often than straight lines of trees, but his favorite is a single cypress tree in 2 to 4 feet of water, but not far from deeper water. He will often pitch the jig past the tree and let it fall, but if they don't hit that, he'll get the tip of his rod as close to the tree as he can and drop it right down the side hoping to put it right in front of the fish.

The key to fish moving up on the trees is usually water temperature. It varies some from lake to lake, but when water temperatures get in the upper 50s they start to move in. When it hits 60 degrees, the bite is on.

KIDNAPPED BY CRAPPIE UP NEXT ➤





Kimmy Haddix

Steve Danna helped design B'n'M's 'Tree Thumper' crappie pole for snatch crappie away from trees during the spring.

GET YOUR HANDS ON A 'TREE THUMPER'

Not many folks get to fish the way they most like to, with a rod that they designed and that carries their name, but the Tree Thumper™ by B'n'M gives crappie pro Steve Danna that distinct privilege.

He had spoken several times with Jack Wells, the company president, about making a crappie pole just for fishing trees and this year, after more than a year of development tweaks, it is now on the market.

The Tree Thumper comes in 10- and 11-foot lengths. It combines the lightness of B'n'M's Ultra-Lite series with the strength of its Brush Cutter series to offer lightness and sensitivity while still being able to snatch slabs away from trees, root systems and stumps. Made of a blend of high-modulus graphite, it features ceramic inserts, a bottom reel seat, and a contoured handle made of 100-percent Portuguese cork.

"It's light enough to hold in your hand all day-long and it's not too stiff. It's perfectly balanced and sensitive enough to feel the slightest thump," Danna said, "but it's got enough backbone to horse a big crappie up without so much bend that rod is nearly doubled." ■

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KIDNAPPED BY CRAPPIE

Danna is one of many former bass fishermen who learned to love fishing for crappie. As he travels putting on fishing seminars and as an instructor at Crappie University, he shares a slide show that is titled, “Kidnapped by Crappie.” He also fishes professionally on two crappie circuits.

He will fish whatever pattern and technique he needs to in order to catch crappie, but his heart is always dropping that jig down by the cypress tree.

“Fish as many trees as you can,” he said. “When they are on the trees, you’ll have the time of your life.”

Danna said there is kind of a “numbers game” when fishing trees for crappie. Every tree or stretch of trees won’t hold fish, and it isn’t easy to look at a tree and see if it will hold a crappie; you just have to fish them. You will begin to find that certain trees, or groups of trees, hold crappie. Concentrate your efforts on those instead of trying to fish every tree. You’ll also find that some trees only hold one crappie, but certain ones may give up five to 10 fish if you are patient. Only experience can teach you which ones.

Danna also reminds anglers that crappie feed up, even in shallow water, so don’t let your jig fall all the way to the bottom and leave it there. Fish at various depths. Also, on some days, crappie will want the bait totally still, while other days they like it swimming or jigged up and down. Pay attention when you get a bite, repeat the procedure, and you will get more bites.

“This time of year, we are subject to late cold fronts, and that can change fishing,” he said. “Sometimes, it moves the fish tighter to the tree, but other times, it will move the fish out 10 to 15 feet from the trees to the edge of deeper water. You just have to be flexible and put some time in on the water to learn that.”

Danna said he can’t complete a tree-fishing lesson without another important tip.

Something a lot of people don’t understand is that crappie don’t all spawn at the same time, and they don’t all spawn in



Crappie will move in to spawn at different times, in different areas of the same lake; it takes time on the water to find them spawning.

the same place. The first ones get through, and more move in. If they didn’t, fishermen would catch them all around the bank, and there wouldn’t be any left.

SAVE YOURSELF SOME TROUBLE

In the latter part of March, as the water warms and the spawn draws to an end, fishermen can save themselves some trouble by paying attention to the water around the trees as they approach them to fish.

If you see hundreds of what appear to be small shiners swimming frantically in a circle around the tree, don’t fish there. You are too late. Those are more than likely crappie fry that have already hatched out but don’t feel secure leaving the nesting area just yet. Momma Crappie and Poppa Crappie have probably moved on, and there isn’t any need to fish that tree.

NO SHINERS NEEDED UP NEXT ➤

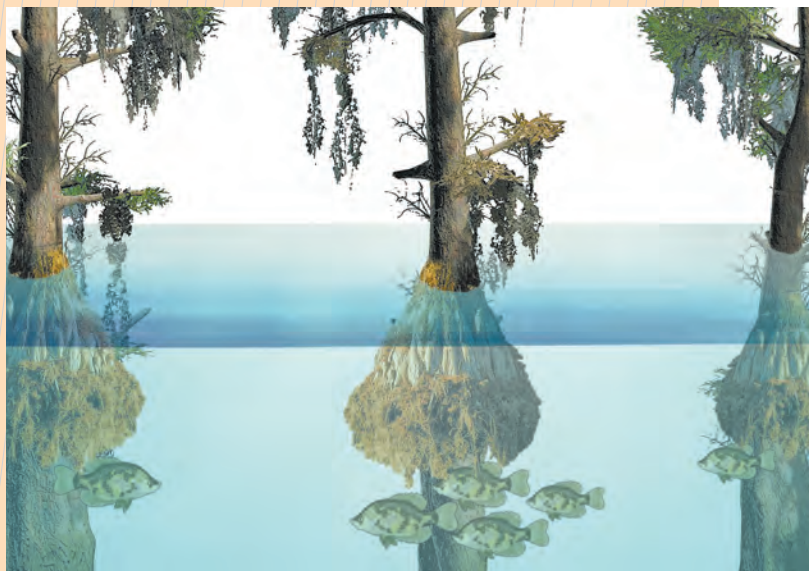
THE TREE YOU CAN'T SEE

Good crappie fishermen see an entire cypress tree and where fish might hide — like the root ball — even if much of it is normally underwater.

When fishermen approach a cypress tree, they see the trunk, limbs and maybe the top of the root system. When crappie swim up beside a cypress tree, they see it in a whole different light.

A normal cypress tree has a huge ball of roots under the water that stick out a foot to 18 inches from the trunk. Under that big ball is more tree trunk. When the water level is normal, this area below the roots is a prime spot for crappie to spawn.

To catch those crappie you’ve got to get your lure as close as you can to that area for them. If you just swim a lure past the root ball, you may not even have it where the fish are. That’s why “tree hugging” is an important technique to have for spring crappie. ■



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NO SHINERS NEEDED

When crappie are on the trees, they can be finicky. You might have to be a perfectionist to get the bait where they'll want to hit it. But when they are aggressive, they'll hit a variety of lures you drop in front of their noses or anywhere near their spawning beds.

That's one of the best things about fishing trees. Some anglers fish with a slip cork and live shiner, but most fish with either hair jigs or soft-plastic jigs on the trees.

Danna said a soft-plastic jig of almost any color will work if you put it in the right place, but he likes crawfish, pink/purple or blue/chartreuse best.

His favorite baits for tree fishing are hair jigs in black, silver or gray. He does have one personal preference, especially on hair jigs; he likes red heads.

The Roadrunner, a popular spinner, can catch fish if you are around trees where you have room to pitch it out and reel it back slowly against the tree trunk. White and white/chartreuse are his favorite colors for Roadrunners.

When fishing against tree trunks, Danna said anglers can save themselves a lot of grief by learning to slowly lower and raise their baits in the water. If you lower the bait and pull it back up too quickly, you'll get hung up a lot. By raising it slowly, if you feel it hit a limb or root, you can let go, then ease it back up again and not get hung. ■



Kimmy Haddox

Steve Danna relies on a variety of hair jigs for much of his "tree thumping" crappie success.



Kinny Haddox has been writing magazine and newspaper articles about the outdoors for 40 years. He also publishes a daily website, lakedarbonnelife.com. He and his wife, DiAnne, live on Lake D'Arbonne in Farmerville.

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PEARLS OF THE PEARL

By Patrick Bonin



Chas Champagne said March is a great time to target crappie as they spawn in the East and West Pearl rivers.

Photo courtesy Chas Champagne

Try these simple tricks to increase your Crappie catches on the Pearl River this month.

When the going gets tough, the tough go ... crappie fishing? That pretty much sums up Chas Champagne's plan of attack for the first quarter of each year. One of Lake Pontchartrain's noted speckled trout and redfish anglers, Champagne likes the change of pace crappie fishing provides — especially since the delectable little

fish are more than willing to bite this time of year. "February and March are well known across the Gulf Coast as being probably the two hardest months to fish speckled trout and redfish," Champagne said. "But I personally enjoy crappie fishing, and it excels in those two months because that's when they spawn." And the creator of Matrix Shad soft-

plastic lures didn't pass up an opportunity to create a Matrix Mini specifically geared to crappie fishermen. Champagne typically targets the East and West Pearl Rivers for crappie, and likes the I-59 river gauge to be between 8 and 13 feet when he plans a March trip. "You want the river falling for sure," said Champagne, who noted he likes focusing on tributaries off the main river because

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the current in the river itself can be too strong to fish. “We have some spots where it’s OK if the river is high, as long as it’s falling. What happens on a falling river is it pulls all of that cleaner, black water out of the swamp, and you’ll see that cleaner water mixing with regular river water itself.”

When water temperatures gets to about 60 or 61 degrees, crappie will move up to spawn, he said.

“Typically, they’re going to get closer to the banks as the water temperature comes up,” he said. “That’s when instead of jiggling them up and down vertically, a little perch cork becomes very effective when targeting cypress knees and areas close to the bank.”

In colder weather, brush piles in deeper water are definitely go-to locations, and Champagne said many are visible above the surface — but that can change each year.

“Brush piles come and go and change from so much flow and debris. Some of them will get hung up right in the middle of a creek,” he said, noting that sonar is a great tool to have at your disposal to locate them. “What a lot of the river gurus do is go when the river is really low in the summertime and mark the locations of those brush piles. Then they

come back and fish them when the river is high in the winter.

“They all look good, but you have to fish them all until you figure out where the fish are at. And every week is different, every day is different.”

DON'T MAKE THIS MISTAKE

Champagne spools up with 6- to 8-pound white Berkley NanoFil line, but always with about a 3-foot leader. He credited Brian Baldwin for many of the crappie tips he’s learned over the years.

“If I’m in the dirty West Pearl, a mono leader is fine,” he said. “But if I’m in any kind of root beer or black water, you want to use a fluorocarbon leader because crappie have really big eyeballs, and their vision is excellent. That’s crucial.”

One of the most invisible and durable fluorocarbon lines on the market is made by P-line.

If he’s fishing deep in 15 to 20 feet of water, Champagne goes with an 1/8-ounce Goldeneye jighead. If he’s under a cork, he goes down to a 1/16-ounce.

“And those little crappie pellets can be pretty effective,” he said. “I don’t mess with them much, but my crappie gurus are big believers. They swear by them.”

In root beer-clear water when he’s using a fluorocarbon leader, Champagne typically goes with a Matrix Mini in the ladies night color. In dirtier water, his favorite color is kryptonite.

Weather-wise, Champagne said the combination of cold weather and a low river can make for ideal conditions.

“Crappie couldn’t care less if it’s 5 degrees or not,” he said, adding that he targets deeper spots like the Lock 1 Canal in brutal winter conditions. “I’ve crushed them on days where I really couldn’t feel my thumbs — it was as cold and nasty as it could get.”

And one more tip if you’re heading to the Pearl for crappie: Champagne said it can be ‘Snag City,’ so take this simple step with your jighead and you’ll spend more time fishing and less time hung up on brush piles.

“We take a pair of pliers and open and close the hook a couple of times to make it more malleable,” he said. “Because a crappie isn’t going to straighten the hook — they’re not powerful fighters.” ■



BACKGROUND: Matrix Shad Mini’s in ladies night, blue horizon and kryptonite. **INSET:** Stephen Wicks shows off a nice crappie that fell for a ladies night Matrix Mini dyed blue and chartreuse with Spike-It Dip-N-Glo markers.

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How to use jerkbaits to **CATCH MONSTER SPECKS**

By Jon Miller

Want to catch bigger and possibly record trout on an artificial lure? Try these proven techniques.

If you want to increase the average size of the speckled trout you catch — while also increasing your chances of catching a trophy trout — you need to consider fishing jerkbaits.

A jerkbait is one of the most-effective ways to deliver a convincing, big-meal presentation to bigger speckled trout without expending the time and energy required to catch, sustain and fish live bait.

The brilliance of a well-presented jerkbait is that it can reach fish at almost any depth, produce lifelike movements and deliver the pause that drives speckled trout to attack.

Jerkbaits may appear similar in form to crankbaits, but they are miles apart in

method of use and versatility. Crankbaits are designed to deliver a single action, regardless of the fisherman's skill level. Jerkbaits can be made to deliver multiple actions, and they reward the fisherman for his or her level of skill and creativity.

Jerkbaits are hard baits with a distinct nose point and the tow point on the tip of the nose. They can have a small diving lip or be lipless. They can be floating, suspending or sinking. They are often called slashbait, ripbait, jerkbait, twitchbait or glidebait.

There are exceptions to these guidelines, but the common features of these baits is that they are almost useless on a straight retrieve, but when fished with skill, they are astonishingly lifelike.





JERKBAIT SPECKS

Lipped jerkbaits may have a subtle movement on a straight retrieve, but they come to life when retrieved with jerks and pauses.

Lipless jerkbaits can be fished fast or slow, but typically slower than their lipped brothers. A slower action takes advantage of the ability of the bait to wander in an unpredictable, lifelike fashion when gliding after being twitched, like a baitfish that's panicked or in physical distress.

It's well-documented that predator fish are likely to strike first at baitfish that stand out from the others around them.

TOPS IN CLEARER WATER

Jerkbaits are most effective in clearer water — water with visibility greater than 12 inches — but they have been used effectively where water clarity is typically less than 12 inches, such as in the Delacroix marshes.

That said, jerkbaits are so effective in the clear waters of the MRGO channel, that it could be renamed "Jerkbait Alley." Numerous times, I have had the pleasure of seeing 17-inch trout rise in clear water, and attack my jerkbait in the MRGO channel.

In colder water, less than 60 degrees, try a jerkbait that sinks. Twitch it up, and then give it slack line for a natural fall back toward the bottom. When the bait is falling, watch the line for a sudden movement indicating a trout strike, then set the hook. Most jerkbaits in use are a quarter-inch or heavier, so



Tommy Vidrine caught this nice speck using an Unfair Lures slow-sinking twitch-bait called the Rip and Slash. The unpredictable action of a jerkbait is tough for speckled trout, especially bigger specimens, to resist.

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Fluorocarbon leaders are the norm when fishing jerkbaits because of its natural low visibility underwater.

adequate casting distance with baitcasting tackle is easily achieved.

Jerkbaits are typically worked with the rod angled down or to the side, so shorter rods from 6-foot to 6-foot-6 achieve the best rod angles. Most jerkbaits look more lifelike darting and suspending when kept near a horizontal position. To achieve this, hold the rod at a 30-degree downward angle, and apply action by snapping the rod tip down and back. Spinning gear has an advantage for this technique, because the hand is on top of the rod, and the wrist is simply curled to deliver the snap.

Braided main line with a fluorocarbon leader is common for jerkbait fishing, with the braid being 20- to 30-pound test and the leader from 14- to 17-pound test. The fluorocarbon leader is used for low line-visibility near the bait, and the braid for sensitivity.

Sensitivity is important when fishing sinking jerkbaits with a slack-line technique. Tie your jerkbait on with a loop knot, which increases the free movement of the bait and theoretically further enhances its lifelike qualities.



THE BAITS NEXT PAGE >

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MATCH BAITS, TECHNIQUES

JERKBAIT SPECKS

Different jerkbaits work better when fished with different retrieves or techniques. Here are seven popular jerkbaits and techniques that match their strengths. These aren't the only jerkbaits around, but they cover the range of styles and functions of jerkbaits regularly used.

- **RAPALA X-RAP M08.** The M08 is a 3½-inch jerkbait that suspends and has a dive rating of 3 to 5 feet. It has a profile closely matching the inland silverside minnow or a bay anchovy but will catch trout weighing upwards of 4 pounds regularly. Work this lure with hard jerks and short pauses. It's great in spring and fall, and especially when rapidly fishing a shoreline looking for scattered trout.
- **RAPALA SHADOW RAP M11.** This is a suspending, lipped bait, 4¾ inches long with a shallow diving depth of 2 to 4 feet. Because it's a shallow diver, use it in warmer water around rock jetties and in shallow, marsh areas. It is best fished more slowly than an X-Rap, and the longer profile gives it big-meal appeal, like a medium-sized mullet.
- **RAPALA SHADOW RAP SHAD DEEP M09.** This jerkbait is 3½ inches long, with a 5- to 6-foot dive rating. This bait works on trout hanging in deeper water that will strike because of an aggressive bait presentation.
- **RAPALA SUBWALK M09.** This is a lipless jerkbait, often called a twitchbait. Its 3½-inch, full body gives it the profile of a meal-sized mullet. It's labeled as suspending with a running depth of 2 feet, but it sinks readily, so it can be fished deep if a slower action is used. The SubWalk has a fluid movement when twitched; it will glide aimlessly when line tension is released. Fish the bait with a couple of twitches, followed by about 5 seconds of slack line.

- **PAUL BROWN'S FAT BOY SUSPENDING.** The Fat Boy is a big-profile twitchbait, even though it's only 3½ inches long. It's called "suspending," but in brackish water, it's slow sinking. Paul Browns have a semi-rigid rubber body that is soft to the touch. Some of these lures, including the Fat Boy, have a bendable tail feature, which allows the bait to be set to rise or dive when twitched. Bending the tail down causes a dive and up makes it rise. Another special feature is its wedge-shaped body that makes it wobble from side to side when falling. This feature puts extra action into the fall, which is great because the trout typically strike a falling or resting bait.

Fish the Fat Boy relatively slowly and allowing plenty of fall time. The sinking characteristic, combined with excellent twitch action, make this bait an excellent cold-water alternative to jiggling swimbaits.

- **PAUL BROWN'S SOFT-DINE SUSPENDING.** The Soft-Dine is a small-profile twitchbait that is 3 inches long. There is also a larger, XL version that behaves similarly. It's constructed like the Fat Boy, sinks readily and has the same wobble on the fall. It does not have the tail adjustment. Throw this bait up against rocks, like the MRGO rocks, and give the bait plenty of fall time. This bait is very productive when fished slowly, but it can also maintain good action when worked with hard jerks, making it a good choice for fast-paced fishing.

- **LIVE TARGET SARDINE TWITCHBAIT.** This is a floating twitchbait, that is 3½ inches long, with a big profile. It will submerge to a few inches when worked. It has a nice, darting action, but the floating body makes the action more subdued as compared to suspending baits. Fish this bait over submerged grass beds, where it's hard to keep a suspending jerkbait out of the grass. ■



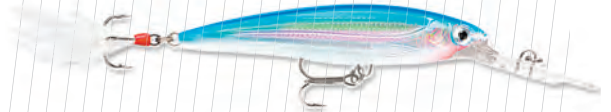
Jon Miller is an engineer, lifetime fisherman, and host of the YouTube channel *Jon Miller Fishing*.



Rapala X-Rap M08



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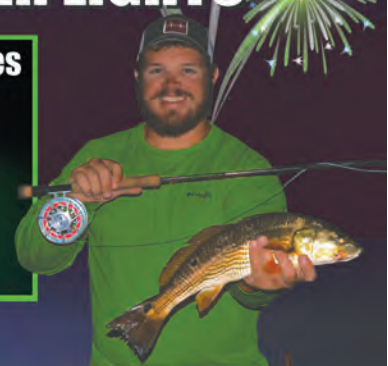
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3 TIPS

TO CATCH STAGING MRGO SPECKS



A slow-sinking hardball like a MirrO lure 52R is a great lure for enticing specks to bite, either by trolling or casting and retrieving.

Plenty of speckled trout get in the big channel on their way to the Gulf as the water warms this month. Not enough fishermen follow them, but one veteran guide lays out the blueprint for success once they do.

■ By Patrick Bonin

March Madness, the NCAA's 68-team college basketball championship tournament, is about set to rev up again. Buzzer-beaters, shocking blowouts and bracket-busting upsets are a staple of the event, which culminates with the Final Four in Minneapolis early in April.

A whole different kind of madness that will take place at the same time is speckled trout fishing across Louisiana's coast. The calendar icon usually associated with March shows a howling wind or a flying kite, and the unpredictability of the end of

winter and the start of spring in the Deep South makes it a tough time to consistently target yellowmouths.

Will the transition of fish out of Louisiana's coastal marshes begin early? Will late cold fronts push through and cause trout to hang tight before heading out en masse in April? Or will spring floods swell in the Mississippi River, delivering an inundation of freshwater to areas like Delacroix?

Who knows?

But Capt. Charlie Thomason with Bayou Charters in St. Bernard said sections of the Mississippi River

Gulf Outlet — the 76-mile channel constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the 1960s to provide ships with a shorter route to the Gulf of Mexico from the Port of New Orleans — is a target-rich opportunity for maddening March specks.

“It’s a staging month, so the fish don’t really feed too much because the water temperature is still pretty cool,” said Thomason, who said typical readings should be in the mid-50s, maybe approaching 60 degrees if there’s a longer warm spell. “But what they do is start staging, suspending in that deeper water. And that’s when the MRGO is one of

the most-untouched fisheries around, including by me.

“There’s tons of fish in there because it’s a deepwater channel, but nobody really fishes it correctly.”

Thomason said he focuses his efforts from the Violet Canal to Shell Beach. Most places in that area range from 15 to 25 feet deep, around 30 feet at the deepest, he said.

“A warming trend typically happens in March, and the fish start making their migration out to the outer fringes of the Biloxi Marsh, like the Lake of Two Trees area, and they’ll start filtering out there,” he said. “March is kind of that staging

time, where they don’t make the true move out yet, because they know some cold fronts could still come through, so they stay in the channel and move around in there feeding because that’s where all the bait and shrimp are.

“March is kind of when things get going, but April is when it really starts happening. That’s what makes this such a tough month.”

If you’re dead set on chasing down some March trout, Thomason had three tips to keep in mind if you decide to target the MRGO.

#1 PICK YOUR DAYS

This isn’t particularly a trip for the faint of heart. If you don’t like fishing in cool, windy, cloudy conditions, you might want to hang on and wait until April arrives.

“You have to try to go out and fish when it’s not a blue-bird sky day,” he said. “You want it to be overcast, with maybe a front approaching or a front just passed, where it’s still overcast and misty or rainy. That’s the conditions that will be best to fish in there.”

“When you have high pressure and really pretty days, 90 percent of the time it’s going to be slick calm, and you’re not going to have a lot of tide movement — that makes the fishing extremely tough. The prettier the day, that’s when you should stay home and spend time with your family. When it’s rainy and windy and kind of dreary, that’s when you want to be fishing.”

And Thomason said if the water temperature isn’t at least 50 degrees, move on to Plan B.

“If it’s below 50, go catch some redfish somewhere,” he said. “It’s just not worth the effort most of the time.”



When weather conditions cooperate, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet is a great place to target speckled trout in March.

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#2 TROLLING THE LEDGES

A slow-sinking hardbait, like a MirrOlure 52 MR, is Thomason's first choice when either casting and retrieving or trolling along the channel ledges, which are typically about 80 feet from the shore. He stressed this isn't a jerkbait deal, with lots of twitching involved.

"Just throw it out and bring it in with a slow retrieve. You can pause it if you want, but most of the time it's just a slow retrieve in, because at that point, nothing in the water is swimming really fast," he said. "You'll be fishing between 13 and 20 feet deep. If you're trolling, the slower the better. You can use slow idle, or troll real slow on your trolling motor, like 2 mph. Stay right on the ledge — it's pretty much a slow slope from the shore out to about 80 feet, then it just drops off, like a canyon. If you're in real clear water, you can see it."

Thomason spools on 20-pound Fins Windtamer braid, which has the diameter of 6-pound mono. He uses a 7- to 8-foot fluorocarbon leader in the 10- to 12-pound range.

"You've got to remember, you want to keep the displacement of that line to a minimum when you're trolling," he said, noting that your lure should be halfway to two-thirds of the way down, which you can control by your trolling speed. "If you have big, thick line, it won't sink properly. It'll just rise up."

Dave Hall caught this 22-inch beauty fishing the MRGO.

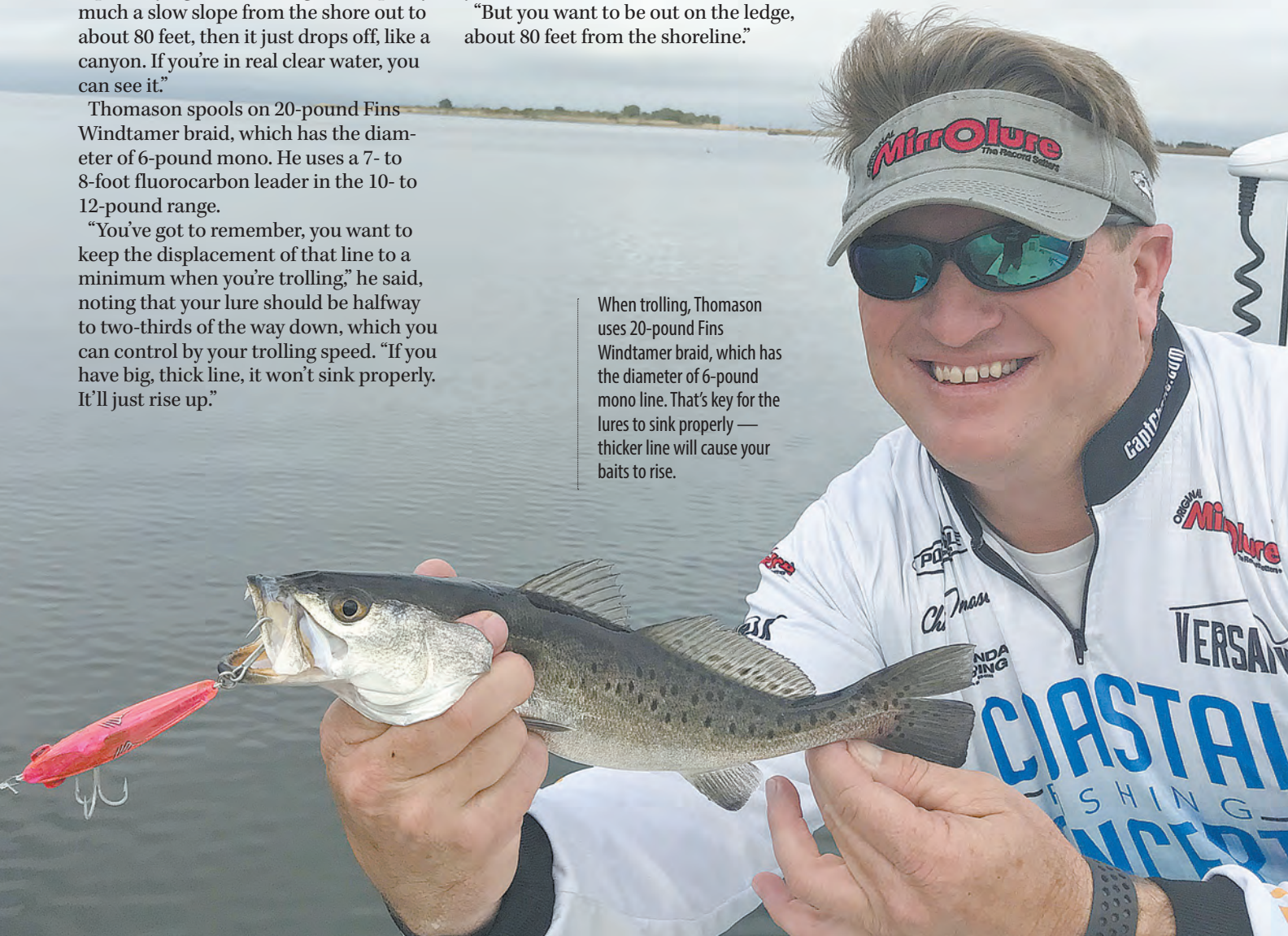


Focus on irregularities along the shoreline to help locate fish as you move over the ledge.

"What I find is that anywhere down the spoil bank the land comes out to a point, normally most of your bites will come wherever that irregularity is on the bank," he said. "When the bank comes out, it seems like that's where a current choke happens, and the fish kind of gang up there. And remember, you can do the same thing casting, just trolling down the bank with your trolling motor. A slow retrieve from the shallows coming out is what you need.

"But you want to be out on the ledge, about 80 feet from the shoreline."

When trolling, Thomason uses 20-pound Fins Windtamer braid, which has the diameter of 6-pound mono line. That's key for the lures to sink properly — thicker line will cause your baits to rise.



#3 TARGET LAKE BORGNE DRAINS

From about Campo's Marina up to the Violet Canal, Thomason said to focus on drains on the Lake Borgne side of the MRGO with a popping cork.

"I like the VersaMaxx Bolt cork, because it gives you the ability to change depths as you're fishing that side," he said, noting that he focuses on 3- to 6-foot deep water. "If you can get live shrimp, I would definitely do that because it really makes a difference. If you can't, just match your favorite artificials to the color of the water."

Thomason prefers a shrimp creole Matrix Shad in clearer water, and any bait with a chartreuse tail if the water is stained. Under the cork, he opts for a quarter-ounce jighead

"I don't think color makes that much of a difference in dirty water," he said. "Just work the mouths of the drains, where it pours into the channel from Lake Borgne."

Summing things up, Thomason said the MRGO just makes sense as a spot to target in March as fish stage up in preparation to move to outside waters to spawn in the coming months.

"It's one big, gigantic deep area with lot of bait," he said. "And if a front comes through, they have the ability to drop right down to the bottom. If it warms up a few days and their metabolism revs up, they can swim up and down that ledge feeding until it's time to move out. They're not going to move out until they know cold fronts aren't going to catch them."

Even better, because the

MRGO is protected from the wind, pedal-powered anglers can also get in on the action.

"A kayak fisherman can launch at Campo's and go right out there and start fishing doing the same thing, trolling right there," Thomason said. "And they produce a lot of fish doing that." ■

Editor's Note: To contact Capt. Charlie Thomason with Bayou Charters, call 504-278-3474 or visit www.captaincharlie.com.



In addition to specks, line-peeling redds are always a possibility in the MRGO.



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Patrick Bonin, a life-long Louisiana resident, has covered outdoor news in the Bayou State for years.



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SPECKLED TRUTH

Chris Bush

Jerkbaits will trigger strikes from speckled trout year-round, but they're especially productive in cold weather.



JERKBAITS CAN GIVE SPECKLED TROUT FITS

LEARN WHAT DIFFERENT BAITS DO, PICK THE SITUATIONS WHERE THEY FIT BEST, CATCH TROUT

The longer it sits, the harder they hit it.

For those not familiar with the reference, it involves casting jerkbaits and the merciless response that speckled trout exhibit after staring down its hard-plastic foe.

Although this technique can be fished year-round, anglers across many state lines utter this phrase a little more often in the presence of Ol' Man Winter. Proven repeatedly, erratic movement coupled with a brilliant flash resonates well with trout behavior, but anglers seldom embrace their true capability. I want to explore three simple facets — size, depth and action — to becoming a more-proficient jerkbait angler and explore some brands and what capabilities they provide.

LURE SIZE

Spawned by bass anglers decades ago, jerkbaits have evolved to mirror

our tech-savvy world. CNC machines replaced Buck knives and balsa wood, and as a result, offer anglers, regardless of fishery, a myriad of options. Flooded by “pro staff” marketing, the industry makes it tough for fisherman to sift through what works and what's 40-percent off.

For someone new looking to add one to their arsenal, size is the basic component that needs extensive consideration. I personally choose jerkbaits that range from 3½ to 5 inches long, and although I've caught big trout with large bits of forage waving at me from their throats, I still feel most confident with lures in this range.

Smaller jerkbaits like the Rapala RipStop 09 (3½ inches) offer finesse presentations on calm, clear days with exceptional water clarity, while larger-profile jerkbaits like the Berkley Juke 100 present a heartier offering with a less-refined and cumbersome action. Aside

from brand, which I'll suggest later, size dictates flash and action, and given water clarity (dirty or clear) and conditions (windy or calm), having a variety in that range accentuates your offering.

DEPTH

Normally dictated by the size of the rigid, plastic lip positioned at a 45-degree angle on the nose of the bait, it's important to know the depth for which the lure is rated. How do you know? See the bait's packaging for details. Jerkbaits like the Rapala Shadow Rap Shad present a larger offering but only get down to a max depth of 3 feet, depending on salinity and terminal tackle. Comparable in size, though, the MirrOlure L30 (MirrOlip), can reach depths greater than 6 feet, a result of a slightly larger lip. Having said that, both lure ratings fall within manufacturer specifications. Understanding that simple concept affords you to choose

the right lure/profile for the job. Since the majority of fish are suspended, an angler can effectively target that portion of the water column.

ACTION

“Action” in a fishing word used loosely to describe lure characteristics. In this particular case, the action referred to is whether the bait descends, suspends or ascends after you finish your twitch cadence. Revisiting my opening comment about “the longer it sits” refers to all action types. Ascending jerkbaits like the Smithwick Rattling Rogue or the Texas Custom Lures MirrOlure Double D float back to the top, but they do so at varying rates of speed. Depending on whether fish are shallow or deep in the water column, the longer you can let the bait sit before it reaches the surface or bottom, the better chance you have at the fish responding to your presentation.

To highlight my point, on a recent trip, I found some really nice fish in about 3 feet of water holding over shell. After throwing an ascending lure (Double D) with little response, I chose a Berkley Juke 100 with a deeper dive/ascending capability. After one great fish, little other interest was shown, so I swapped to a Rapala Shadow Rap (4 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches) which affords me to fish the middle column (1 $\frac{1}{2}$ feet) with a suspending action. On consecutive casts, two above-average trout were landed and safely released.

Taking stock, I found that the longer I let the lure sit — sometimes upwards of 5 seconds — the harder they would hit it. Due in large part to water temperature, clarity and calm conditions, the trout were keyed in on small

continues on page 128

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continues from page 127

movements. Ascending or descending baits just weren't matching the fish's behavior, but like all things fishing, it varies from day-to-day.

This is the jerkbait game. If observant and confident with a myriad of lures and in tune with their capabilities of size, depth and action, you can not only catch a substantial number of fish, but at the same time, you can target bigger bites.



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

Hopefully this will help get you started, and as always please reach out if you have any questions. Until next time, tight lines, God bless and remember take what you need and release the rest! ■

BRANDS/LURES WORTH USING

(NOT ALL ENCOMPASSING):

- Rapala Shadow Rap
- Rapala Shadow Rap Shad
- MirrOlure L30
- Bomber Long-A
- Yo-Zuri Sashimi JerkBait
- Rapala Rip Stop (09 & 11)
- Smithwick Rattling Rogue
- Strike King KVD Series
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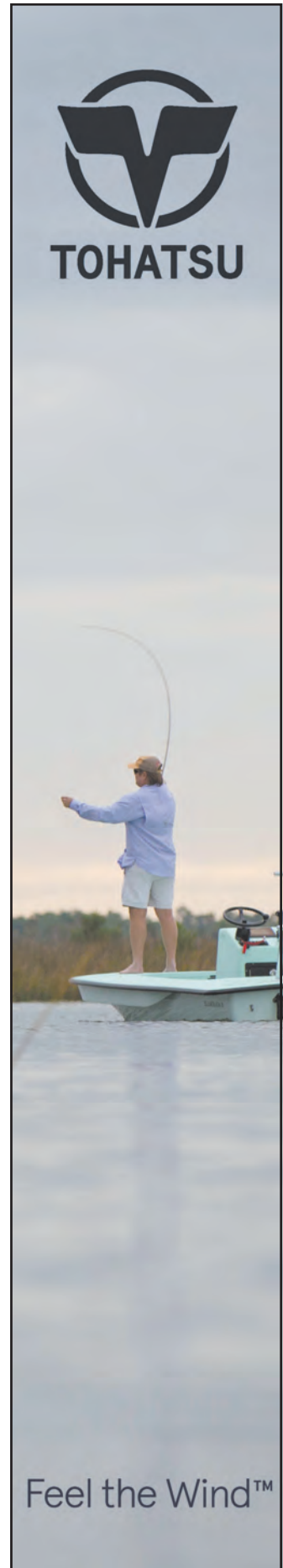
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CALCASIEU REBOUND?

Warm weather will help March trout fishing

Will Calcasieu Lake rebound from what many speckled trout fishermen believe was a subpar year in 2018? Depending on the weather and water conditions in southwest Louisiana, they'll find out in March. If a cold, wet winter drags on well into the month, well, better luck next month. If it's warm and dry, game's on for speckled trout.

"March is a tough one — one of the hardest months to predict. It can be a good trout month or a terrible trout month, depending on how much rain and the temperature. If it stays cold and wet, it'll be tough. If it is warm and dry, fishing should be good," said Kirk Stansel, who along with his brothers, Guy and Bobby Joe, own Hackberry Rod & Gun.

Stansel is hoping against hope that a cold front doesn't greet March fishermen. A freeze last winter was responsible for a subpar 2018, he believes, citing the after-effects of the worst fish kill since 1989. The next year wasn't a successful one but, he said, "1991 was good. They bounce back, but they won't be big."

Last year's fishing malaise was compounded by freshwater, a lot of rain, he said, and this is the fourth year of a rain cycle that's brought to the area an enormous amount of freshwater.

If conditions are favorable in March, Stansel and other anglers will target speckled trout in the muddy, shallow areas along the



Jesse White with a giant stringer of fish caught in Calcasieu Lake using a Paul Brown Corky.

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West Cove shoreline that warm up quickly, he said.

"I'm hoping it's in the 60s," he said of the water temperature. "If it's in the 50s, you've got to slow the presentation down. You won't get a lot of bites, but you will get a big bite."

Stansel recommends fishing those mud-bottom areas later in the day, after the sun rises and warms the water. The prerequisite is to find such an area with baitfish and decent water, he said.

When the wind isn't too strong he'll fish the windward shorelines.

"If there's only a little chop, I'll fish the windward side. Wave action warms the water up," said Stansel, who will throw Corky Fat Boys or MirrOdines featuring some chartreuse, on braided line. Braided line is smaller in diameter and allows the angler to cast farther, he said, and during the retrieve, when the artificial lure is twitched, they dart quicker because there is no stretch.

Stansel does use a 2-foot leader of 20- to 30-pound monofilament connecting the Corky Fat Boy or MirrOdine to the braided line and ties the leader to it with an improved clinch knot.

"I've caught a lot of big fish on that. When you get a bite, they hammer it," he said.

Perhaps Stansel's all-time favorite lure for March — or any other time, for that matter — is a topwater Super Spook, bone-colored with iridescent sides. If the water is ultra-clear, use a model with clear sides and chartreuse on the top and bottom. Clown and white/red head models also are effective.

Because it's a topwater bait, Stansel usually fishes it in warmer water conditions, 60 degrees and above strictly.

"On warm days, two or three consecutive days, I'll pull out the topwater and chunk it," he said.

— Don Shoopman

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Redfish between 18 and 30 pounds are regular catches this month around the mouth of Grand Bayou du Large.



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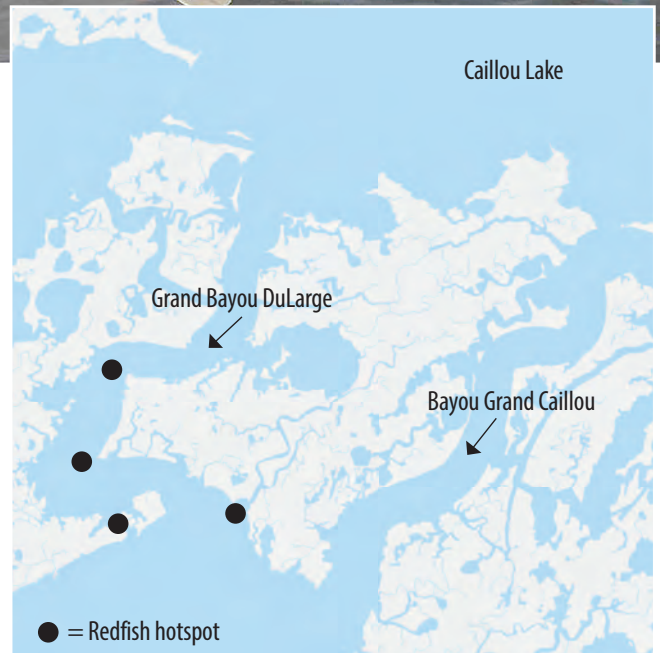
Grand Bayou du Large is full of big, hungry redfish throughout March

That unmistakable feeling of being connected via fishing line to an underwater Volkswagen — or so it seems — whenever you fight a bull red, appeals to many anglers before the height of the spring speckled trout season gets under way in late March and early April along the coastline in South Central Louisiana.

If you want to do battle with bull reds and the bull drum that also bite in the same locations, several areas offer the opportunity in March, according to Bill Lake of Houma, who owns Dularge-based Bayou Guide Service. Lake spends a lot of hours in Marsh helping fishermen get their hands on redfish weighing an average of 18 to 30 pounds.

“It’s a very good month for bull reds. We catch most of them in the deeper passes,” he said. “Bull reds are loaded up in there because of the deeper water, and they can live in there year-round. In March, we still catch them in 10 to 15 feet of water. They get active and eat. There’s plenty of mullets and crabs. We always catch a lot of drum with them. The drum and bull reds are in the same places.”

Lake said the most-consistent spot for bull reds is the mouth of Grand Bayou du Large, where it meets the Gulf of Mexico. Bull reds are prevalent in the deep water, feeding on mullet and crabs, noting the key is to position the boat and anchor in one of the many cuts at the mouth of the bayou. Set up upcurrent in



10- to 15-foot depths and cast downcurrent into 20- to 25-foot depths.

His bait of choice is a Carolina-rigged mullet or crab on a No. 9/0 hook under a 3-ounce weight. With the prospect of hooking up with bull reds weighing 30 pounds or better on any cast, Lake goes prepared. He uses an 80-pound monofilament leader tied to 30-pound monofilament, he said.

Lake pointed to several other places that are home to bull reds in March, among them Bayou Grand Caillou and the southwest corner of Sister Lake.

— Don Shoopman



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Hunting opportunities for wild turkeys abound on public land in Louisiana — six Wildlife Management Areas boast a high hunter-success rate. Look to these WMAs when searching for productive public ground this year.

- **FORT POLK WMA** is 10 miles south of Leesville in Vernon Parish;
- **PEASON RIDGE WMA** is 14 miles north of Leesville in Natchitoches, Sabine and Vernon parishes;
- **CLEAR CREEK WMA** is 20 miles west of Leesville in Vernon Parish;
- **WEST BAY WMA** is near Elizabeth in Allen Parish;
- **BIG LAKE WMA** is 12 miles west of Gilbert in Franklin, Tensas and Madison parishes;
- **BODCAU WMA** is 17 miles northeast of Bossier City in Bossier and Webster parishes.

"I would caution people who want to hunt Fort Polk and Peason Ridge, to keep in mind it's owned by the (U.S.) Department of Defense," said Cody Cedotal, the turkey program manager for the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. "You really want to check maps posted online each week to make sure the area you want to hunt is

open. Large portions routinely close for military training."

Cedotal said if hunters are faced with closures on Fort Polk or Peason Ridge, to look to Kisatchie National Forest, which boasts more than 600,000 acres that is available to the public. "Those five ranger districts have good turkey populations," he said.

Statewide, however, the turkey population is still on the decline, a trend that began in the early 2000s.

"We had a stretch of wet springs and that dampened reproduction rates and really hurt the population overall," he said. "We need several years in a row of good reproduction, and we'll feel a lot better about our turkey population in the state as a whole."

Early in the season, Cedotal said turkeys stay around bottomland hardwoods where hard mast is still available. "And then, as the green up occurs, they use those upland ridge areas a little more," he said.

Cedotal said it's best to hit the woods on high-pressure days with clear mornings, typically without much wind.

"They tend to gobble better then," he said. "Make sure you are familiar as possible with the area beforehand. Do some scouting prior to the hunt, before the season or before the hunt to try to locate some birds." ■



Photo courtesy Harmon Carson

GAME WARDEN

Keith LaCaze

Trophy deer like this 10-point may be the exclusive target of some poachers who are only interested in the biggest and the best. **INSET:** This massive, mounted trophy is in the process of being scored by an official scorer for the Boone and Crockett Club. It is not unheard for such trophies to be stolen from their owners.



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No matter what particular outdoor pursuit a hunter chooses, it requires putting forth one's best effort and best behavior. No matter the species in question, we owe it fair chase and ethical conduct. Any trophy taken legally and ethically is truly a hard-earned prize and the success of the hunt is adequate reward for the hunter.

A good hunter does not need fame, adulation or the largest buck in the woods in order to derive pride and satisfaction from the hunt. Although huge antlers are coveted by any hunter — whether he or she admits it or not — they are not the all-consuming reason for hunting, nor should they be. While there is certainly nothing wrong with setting the bar high and holding out for a giant, the desire for records book game may lead some to go a bit too far.

During my law-enforcement career, the majority of trophy deer hunters encountered were ethical and legal sportsmen.

They may have gone the entire season without pressing the trigger, but they knew where the line was and did not cross it. To do so would taint the trophy and make it worthless in their eyes. Unfortunately, that cannot be said for everyone.

Here are a couple of examples of situations where the desire for trophy deer overrode the constraints of legality, ethics and fair chase. Although these are rare and unusual cases, they are examples of some of the more extreme behaviors attributed to obtaining trophy deer by any means available.

EYE IN THE SKY

Northeast Louisiana is known for rich farmland and big, riverbottom bucks. Firearms seasons in big buck country run to the last days of January. Several years ago, as the seasons were winding

down, wildlife agents began receiving reports from landowners about suspected trespassing and poaching on their property. Initially, everyone assumed vehicle tracks and other evidence of unauthorized visitors was the work of night hunters, the most common deer poaching method.

This was in the days before trail cameras, so photo evidence of trespassing or missing trophy deer was not available. This went on for two or three years before an odd rumor began to circulate. Although hard to believe, the word was

that an airplane was being used to locate big bucks in their beds during the day. With exact coordinates in hand, the poachers would travel by vehicle to the locations and kill the bucks.

I'll skip over some details in the interests of protecting those who assisted in the investigation, but the offenders were ultimately apprehended and charged with violating deer-hunting regulations, airborne-hunting regulations and trespassing laws. Several trophy deer heads were recovered. The pilot who spotted the deer from the air was cooperative and described the technique.

He said that during late winter, the antlers of some bucks were nearly white and easy to see. Bucks were focused on recovering weight after the rut and could usually be found bedded near agriculture fields and other reliable food sources. One had even bedded among round hay bales stored on a field.

TAKE IT TO GO

Some people just can't resist things that catch their eye. Such was the case when a man walked into the foyer of a parish courthouse and saw several mounted trophy deer heads on display. The sheriff had arranged the loan of the trophies from the owners for display. The heads decorated the walls and were under the watchful eye of the deputy sheriff on duty at the desk. The visitor spied the largest buck and apparently decided he had to have it. He left the courthouse, devised a plan and returned later.

On Sunday afternoon, with hardly anyone around, our suspect walked in and told the desk deputy he was there to pick up the trophy deer mount for the owner who

continues on page 138

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LAND FOR SALE

- **223 Acres in Jefferson County, MS** - this beautiful wooded tract lies in the Lorman area and has frontage on Jessamine Ridge Rd. The terrain is rolling hills and hollows and the timber is mixed ages of pine and hardwood. There's a pond on the north side of the property next to the camp site. Asking price is \$3,000/acre.
- **1030 Acres +/- Jefferson Co.** This tract lies in South Central Jefferson County and has frontage on Hwy 33 and McNair Road. The property can be split into two tracts approximately (700+/-) at \$2650/acre, and (330+/-) at \$2500/acre with the final acreage to be determined by a licensed surveyor. The terrain in this area is very gentle rolling hills to flat land and the timber consist of mainly mature pine and hardwood. There is approximately 50 acres of pasture land on the south side of the property as well as numerous food plots, campsites, and a nice pond. The deer and turkey hunting in this area is excellent. List Price \$2600/acre for the entire property.
- **416.5 acres in Jefferson County, MS** - this beautiful property is located in the Red Lick area and has frontage on MS-552. The terrain varies from level to rolling hills and hollows and timber is mostly hardwood. There's a 4-5 acre lake by the small country house which is currently being used as a camp. Asking price is \$2,900/acre.
- **17 Acres in Jefferson County, MS** - this tract is set up and ready to go! It lies in the Rodney area and offers a 600 sq ft cabin that is surrounded by huge pecan trees and has frontage on Rodney Rd. This land is also set up with two plots and box stands. Asking price is \$94,500!
- **700 Acres +/- in Concordia Parish, LA.** The tract is West of the MS River (Glasscock Island). This property has been extremely well developed and maintained and offers an excellent interior road system, shooting lanes, 15 large food plots, 12-4X6 Dixie Deer Blind box stands and Boss Buck Feeders. The tract needs nothing but someone to hunt it! The property also has approx. 100 acres +/- of low water areas with control structures and offers excellent duck hunting. This property is truly a sportsman paradise! Utilities are available! This tract is priced at only \$2,950/acre!

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continues from page 137

wanted it returned. The deputy asked him to wait while she called the sheriff to get authorization to release the head to him. The suspect, a smooth talker, told her to make the call; he would be getting the head off the wall and ready to go while she did so. He was quickly out the door with his prize and making for his car.

A patrol deputy passing by in his cruiser noticed the suspect hurrying to get the head into the car. Having been around long enough to know if something doesn't look right, it probably isn't, the deputy recorded the license number, which led investigators to the suspect's residence, where the antlers were recovered. The mounted cape and head was missing, but the

suspect ultimately admitted to having stopped on the way home to remove the antlers from the mount. He took investigators to the spot where he had dumped the mount.

The suspect had an extensive collection of trophy antlers at his home and said he was a collector with a fascination for trophy deer. He was arrested a few years later by wildlife agents for contest fraud after entering a large set of antlers in a big buck contest under a fake name. He claimed to have purchased the antlers in Texas.

Hunters are crazy about hunting — some more than others. ■



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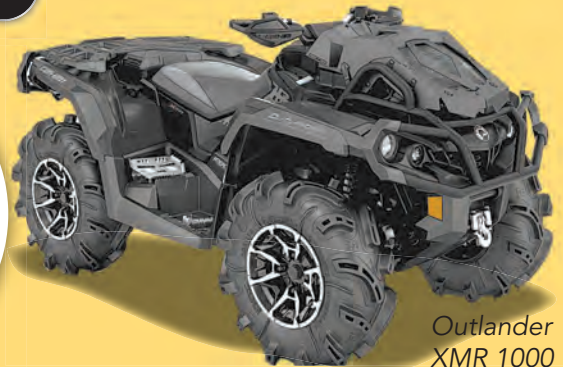


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SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

Brian Cope

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SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: BLACK DRUM

JUVENILE PUPPY DRUM ARE SOME OF THE TASTIEST FISH IN THE GULF

Black drum, *Pogonias cromis*, are a favored catch of many recreational anglers along the Gulf Coast. They can be found inshore, nearshore, and are also abundant on offshore structure, especially throughout the winter.

Black drum are fun to catch, and most anglers agree they are tasty at the table. They have a longish body with comb-like scales. Their body color ranges from light silver to dark gray, and they have four to five vertical black bars that disappear as the fish ages. They have small mouths and chin barbels that help them locate food.


Anglers find black drum in a wide variety of habitat. Sandy bottoms, shell-lined bottoms and live bottoms are all good

choices when looking for black drum. These fish have a preference for being in areas with lots of natural or artificial cover. They tolerate a wide range of salinity levels and are often found in brackish water. During periods of drought, they sometimes travel upriver of the saltwater dividing line. When spawning, however, they do prefer very high levels of salinity.

Black drum are opportunistic feeders and eat small invertebrates, crabs, oysters, worms, mussels, shrimp and small fish. Anglers usually catch them on shrimp.

REGULAR ACCIDENT

Black drum are usually an accidental catch of anglers targeting redfish, flounder, speckled trout or sheepshead.



Angela Godeaux landed this black drum at Big Lake.

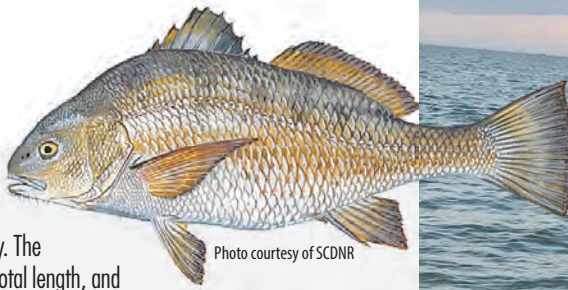


Photo courtesy of SCDNR

REGS, RECORDS:

Anglers in Louisiana can keep five black drum per person, per day. The fish must be at least 16 inches in total length, and anglers can keep only one exceeding 27 inches.

The Louisiana state record was caught in 2007 by Dylan Gonzales in Oak Bayou. The fish weighed 79.50 pounds.

The world record black drum was caught in 1975 by Gerald Townsend in Lewes, DE. The fish weighed 113 pounds, 1 ounce.



Bill Styron was able to catch his first black and first red drum on the same day last Nov. fishing out of Buras.

However, keen anglers catching any of those species will often put their bait or lures very tight to downed trees or any other structure to up their chances of catching a black drum.

These fish don't reproduce until at least until the age of four, when they are typically about 23 inches long. They usually spawn in spring and early summer. Interestingly, black drum sometimes school up in large numbers to head to spawning areas, but other times, they trickle in solo or in very small groups.

Black drum are abundant throughout the southeast, and biologists report no concern over their numbers. They can grow quite large and have been known to live past 60 years of age in the wild.

Anglers sometimes confuse black drum with sheepshead,

especially in younger fish when their vertical bars are most prominent. Young black drum are also sometimes misidentified as croaker. Nicknames for black drum include blackie, short drum, dark drum, and black croaker. ■



Brian Cope is a retired Air Force combat communications technician. He has been writing about the outdoors since 2006. He's spent half his life hunting and fishing. The rest, he said, has been wasted.

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PADDLES 'N PUDDLES

Chris Holmes

REAL KAYAK ANGLERS, REAL REVIEWS

THE PADDLING PUBLIC SHARES ITS OPINIONS



Chris Holmes has kayak fished in the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and many places in between. He can be reached at cholmes@att.net.



Buying a kayak can be a daunting experience for some. The different makes and models are seemingly endless. While virtually any kayak can be used for fishing, it is always best to get one that better suits your needs and style of fishing.

Louisiana Sportsman reached out to several kayak fishermen with various levels of experience to get some personal reviews of popular models. These are non-sponsored anglers who did their homework before plunking down hard-earned money on their kayak of choice. Below is what they had to say about their choice.

There are some important considerations that help ensure you make the right decision. Choosing a brand and model of fishing kayak should not be done lightly. What's best for me and my preferred fishing area and

techniques might not be right for you. Models are available to comfortably fit anglers of all sizes. The most-important piece of advice is to try as many models as possible before making a selection. Utilize kayak demo days offered by your local dealer to test drive several different kayaks for a side-by-side comparison.

PADDLE OR PEDAL?

Paddle kayaks are the least expensive, and most manufacturers offer entry level models. Often, purchasing a lower-end paddle kayak is a great way to experience the sport without going all-in not knowing if it is something you really want to do.

Although paddling is the traditional means of propelling a kayak, almost all major manufacturers also offer some type of pedal-drive propulsion. Pedaling allows anglers a hands-free fishing experience, but it also adds significant additional purchase cost. Pedal-drive mechanisms vary greatly, and making an informed purchase is highly advised.

A new kayak will not come with all of the things you need to make your fishing more successful and enjoyable. You will certainly look to add accessories to suit your needs.

From beginners to seasoned fishermen, kayaking is a great way to get into fishing or off the bank in a relatively inexpensive manner. By putting a little time and research into your purchase, you'll be sure you are getting the right model to fit your needs.



PADDLES 'N PUDDLES

continued

PERCEPTION PESCADOR PRO 12.0



- » Length: 12-foot
- » Width: 32.5 inches
- » Capacity: 375 pounds
- » Hull weight: 64 pounds
- » With seat/drive: n/a
- » **MSRP: \$879.00**
- » Reviewer: Kyle Adibyazdi
- » Hometown: New Orleans
- » Age/Gender: 30, male
- » Years kayak fishing: Six months, but canoe fished with father all his life
- » Freshwater and saltwater
- » Skill level: Fake it 'til you make it
- » How often: Two to three times a month

I purchased this kayak due to the size, price and ease of accessibility and modification. The price was good, and it has lots of accessory rails built in, as well as being lightweight. The kayak has good front- and rear-deck storage. The boat tracks well and moves through the water easily. The kayak is light enough to

car-top, but I use a cart for launching and carrying. I added an anchor trolley and a couple of rod holders. I also added a fishing crate with two additional rod holders and a taco clip to hold an anchor pole.

The only thing I would like to see different is a raised seat. Paddling/fishing from the boat floor can be tough and it is a little

harder to paddle. The kayak is pretty stable for smaller people, but larger anglers may have a little trouble standing. This was a wonderful starter kayak and did exactly what I needed to determine how seriously I wanted to get with the new hobby. I will be looking to upgrade soon. ■

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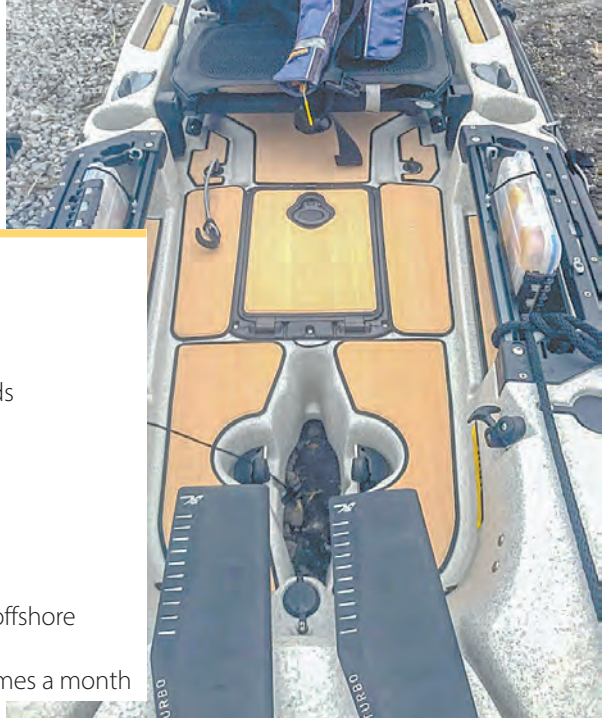
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HOBIE OUTBACK



Having owned both a Hobie Outback and Pro Angler 12, I was excited with the totally redesigned Outback for 2019. Many of the great features of prior Hobie models were combined with the all-new hull design and ability to customize.

The hull is a hybrid of several models and is noticeably faster, quieter and more stable. With the Mirage Drive 180, reverse is quick and simple, and Turbo fins are standard. The hull tracks straight and paddling — if ever necessary — is easier. The carrying capacity was increased by 25 pounds to 425. I like that the cockpit is wider, and the new H-Track Deluxe with H-Rail integrated track makes adding accessories simple. The tracks and rails eliminate the need to drill into the kayak and allow for easy removal or repositioning of accessories.

With front and rear accessory options, the ability to customize the Outback is endless. The easy open square cockpit hatch provides plenty of dry storage and bow hatch provides plenty of in-hull storage options. With the wide, flat floor, standing is easy and comfortable. The outback is really stable. The new rudder takes some getting used to since it doesn't fold out of the way like the old one, but I also like that steering is from either side. Using a cart to carry and launch the kayak can help prevent damaging the rudder.

The stern has inserts installed to easily mount a Power Pole Micro — which is the first thing I did. Also, the new Guardian transducer mount protects the new large transducers by allowing them to be retracted into the hull. My next addition will be a Lowrance Elite 7 with Total Scan transducer and some rod holders. ■

- » Length: 12-foot-9
- » Width: 34 inches
- » Capacity: 425 pounds
- » Hull weight: 85 pounds
- » With seat/drive: 103 pounds
- » **MSRP: \$2,799.00**
- » Reviewer: Aaron Larose
- » Hometown: Baton Rouge
- » Age/Gender: 37, male
- » Years kayak fishing: Five
- » Freshwater, saltwater and offshore
- » Skill level: Advanced
- » How often: Two to three times a month



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PADDLES 'N PUDDLES

continued



OLD TOWN PREDATOR PDL

On a summer vacation to Destin, Fla., I went on a guided kayak fishing trip, and the company has a fleet of PDLs. After fishing all day in the PDL, I noticed that my back and legs were less fatigued, and the kayak was sturdy in the chop. Having instant reverse capabilities was a game-changer. I literally got home, posted my previous kayak for sale.

The best thing about the kayak is the PDL drive. With a 10.6-to-1 gear ratio, it makes it the most-efficient kayak on the market. You can keep the drive down in 11 inches of water. Anything less than that and you will have to raise the drive and paddle. I target mostly speckled trout, so getting into very skinny marsh water isn't a must-have for me.

The Predator PDL comes with six sacrificial mounting plates to allow for easy mounting of accessories without having to drill holes in the kayak. One of the most overlooked but handy features is the self-bailing scupper plugs. They allow water to drain out of the kayak but not flow in. It allows you to stay dry while fishing, which is very helpful in the colder seasons. The Element seat took some getting used to because it sits high up compared to other

kayaks. This actually makes it easier to go from sitting to standing. It also has a built-in pocket under the seat to store Plano boxes, pliers, baits or anything you don't want rolling around on the deck.

The rudder deployment and steering system is also very easy and responsive. Old Town has a "locking rudder control" to keep your kayak straight when pedaling long distances in wind or current. The Predator is 36 inches wide, which makes it extremely stable. Due to the seat height, it takes very little effort to go from a sitting to standing position or from a standing to seated position. With the way the drive well is designed, paddling can be tough at times. When the PDL drive is in the "up" position, it causes the drivewell to be open on the deck. The drivewell catches water when paddling that causes added drag. The kayak is 13-foot-2, so it tracks well when pedaling, and compared to its competitors, the PDL has the most responsive rudder I have used.

The fully rigged weight of the Predator PDL is 117 pounds. This makes carrying the kayak impossible for anyone except the Hulk or Coach O. Buying a quality kayak cart will be necessary. I purchased the C-Tug cart, and it has been a nice pairing.

The only issue I have is the rudder

steering control is on the left side of the boat. I am left-handed, and this can sometimes put me in a pickle. I would like to see either a way to swap sides for the rudder steering handle or for them to

- » Length: 13-foot-2
- » Width: 36 inches
- » Capacity: 500 pounds
- » Hull weight: 96 pounds
- » With seat/drive: 117 pounds
- » **MSRP: \$2,799.00**

- » Reviewer: Matt Laborde
- » Hometown: Alexandria
- » Age/Gender: 24, male
- » Years kayak fishing: Four
- » Freshwater and saltwater
- » Skill level: Advanced
- » How often: Two weekends a month

install one steering control on each side of the boat.

I added a Lowrance depth finder and two Zooka Tube rod holders. In addition to fishing, the Predator PDL can be used as a waterfowl-hunting platform. It is sturdier and has more weight capacity than your traditional pirogue. ■

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PADDLES 'N PUDDLES

continued

JACKSON COOSA FD

The first kayak I owned was a Jackson Cuda. That kayak was fast, and I would typically cover 8 to 10 miles a day. The problem was the stability wasn't that great. I enjoy standing to sight-fish, and more than once I joined the aquatic club. So I switched gears and purchased the Super-Fishal. The stability was outstanding, but it limited the amount of ground I could cover. Several times I found myself too far out from the launch. Fighting storms or wind became laborious and unsafe. The decision was made to get a pedal kayak to improve speed and the ability to cover more ground.

The Coosa FD has gear track all over the boat and allows for a serious amount of customization. There is a Power Pole micro mount in the back, which is great

for anchoring. I think the seat is very comfortable. Also, I liked that the Flex Drive kicks up if you run aground or into other objects. Pedaling the kayak averages about 3.5 mph on the GPS. It tracks very well under both paddle and pedal power. Paddling isn't as efficient as pedaling, but it paddles well.

The stability is very good; I can stand and turn around without fear of tipping over. The drive on the Coosa FD has a nice grab point that makes standing up a bit easier. Shallow-water performance — measured in inches in this boat category — is amazing.

The Coosa FD has a rudder flush with the hull that allows the kayak to be poled around in the shallow ponds of south Louisiana without losing its tracking. When compared to its rivals in this class of kayak, it is a beast. It weighs 115 pounds

- » Length: 12-foot-7
- » Width: 35 inches
- » Capacity: 450 pounds
- » Hull weight: 102 pounds
- » With seat/drive: 115 pounds
- » **MSRP: \$2,999.00**

- » Reviewer: Joe Cantino
- » Hometown: New Orleans
- » Age/Gender: 51, male
- » Years kayak fishing: Seven
- » Saltwater mostly, a little freshwater
- » Skill level: Better than average
- » How often: One or two times a month

NATIVE SLAYER PROPEL 13

This boat is loaded with a high-quality metal gear track that allows a fisherman total customization. A big front hatch that is accessible while on the water, a large rear tank well, and a very comfortable seat. The propel drive is built like a tank. I've already hit a few stumps and they didn't leave a scratch.

Another really cool accessory is the right-hand, forward-facing cup holder/rod holder. When you're retying or unhooking a fish you just place your rod in the holder next to you. The boat is an easy pedal that follows a very natural motion, like riding a

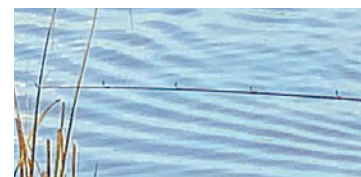
bike. The tracking is greatly improved with an upgraded rudder like mine from Pack and Paddle. One of my favorite things about this boat is how well it paddles when you're too shallow to pedal. If you removed the drive, it would still be a great paddleboat for fishing.

It's a stable boat that is easy to fish and paddle while standing, and I'm no gymnast. The boat is a heavy, 108 pounds rigged with the drive. To help with that, the boat has four heavy-duty attached handles that are padded with foam so you can get a strong, comfortable grip. Native

with the drive and 102 pounds without. Fishing solo requires a kayak-specific launch or a cart to wheel the yak down a boat ramp. Loading the boat beforehand makes this very tough to handle. I keep tackle and gear very light on most days.

The Flex Drive is not nearly as efficient as others and overall speed is a bit slower than the Outback. When fishing grassy areas, I am constantly clearing the prop. I carry my Coosa FD in a truck with a bed extender.

The Lowrance Ti5 is the most-favorite thing I've added — followed by a Power Pole Micro, then an anchor trolley (not necessary with the Power Pole), and rod tube up front to hold fishing rod while standing. ■



sells an aftermarket accessory called the Native Landing Gear made by Boonedox that mounts to the rear gear track and makes loading, unloading and launching a breeze. It's a must-have. The instant reverse makes fishing in wind and current very easy. Some days you can fish all day and never touch an anchor or paddle.

I have added a Pack and Paddle upgraded rudder, Native underseat organizer, a Yak Gear anchor trolley and a prop Weed Guardian. I've also added a Lowrance fish finder, rod holders and a Visi-Pole. ■

JACKSON CRUISE 12



- » Length: 12-foot-3
- » Width: 31.5 inches
- » Capacity: 375 pounds
- » Hull weight: 63 pounds
- » With seat: 69 pounds
- » **MSRP: \$899.00**

I did some research, Jackson kayaks seemed to be a good brand, and the Cruise 12 was moderately priced. The kayak is lightweight, everything is easily accessible, it has high-low seating adjustment and is comfortable.

The Cruise tracks very well and is easy to paddle. The stability sitting down is great; you can stand up in it, and it has a stand-up strap and a flat floor. Standing in this kayak isn't the easiest; however, I have decent balance and can stand in it for a while.

The kayak is very easy to launch, load and carry due to the lighter weight of under 65 pounds. I would like to see additional areas for accessory rails or adding accessory rails to the production models. I added an anchor system and rod holders. The Cruise is easy to cartoon and is a great kayak for those just starting out. ■

- » Reviewer: Cody Petty
- » Hometown: Dry Prong
- » Age/Gender: 26, male
- » Years kayak fishing: One
- » Freshwater and saltwater
- » Skill level: Amateur
- » How often: One to two weekends a month



- » Length: 13-foot-2
- » Width: 33 inches
- » Capacity: 500 pounds
- » Hull weight: 89 pounds
- » With seat/drive: 108 pounds
- » **MSRP: \$2,599.00**

- » Reviewer: Stephen Thompson
- » Hometown: Canton, MS
- » Age/Gender: 35, male
- » Years kayak fishing: Six
- » Freshwater and saltwater
- » Skill level: Above-average
- » How often: Once a week if possible

PADDLES 'N PUDDLES

continued

HOBIE COMPASS

Like that Hobie combined features from several of their top models when designing the Compass. I made my purchase decision based on weight, price and excellent reviews. It tracks well, turns on a dime and is very easy to pedal. It also paddles as well as

it pedals, which can't be said for many pedal-drive kayaks, including some of the older Outbacks.

Most people can stand in them; I try not to due to balance issues. It's very stable as well.

I upgraded from a paddle kayak, and the

- » Length: 12-foot
- » Width: 34 inches
- » Capacity: 400 pounds
- » Hull weight: 68 pounds
- » With seat/drive: 87 pounds
- » **MSRP: \$1,949.00**

- » Reviewer: Robyn Bordelon
- » Hometown: Destrehan
- » Age/Gender: 40, female
- » Years kayak fishing: Seven
- » Freshwater and saltwater
- » Skill level: Above average
- » How often: Once a month, but every weekend in spring

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Mirage pedal system is great. I use a Hobie cart for ease of loading and launching, and I carry the kayak in the bed of a pickup truck. As for accessories, I added a square hatch, map pockets and relocated paddle bungee hook. Rod holders and an anchor trolley were also added. The only suggested changes I have would be to have carry handles on the sides and not just hand indentations to grab. The paddle bungee hook also needs to be relocated as it interferes with the seat strap.

As a female angler who does a lot of fishing alone in the spring, I appreciate that Hobie designed a lightweight, minimalist kayak that I can easily load into the truck bed and not struggle with. I'd rather struggle with an ice chest full of big catfish than with a heavy kayak. ■

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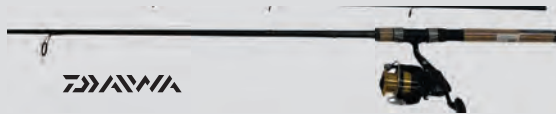
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LOUISIANA'S MOST EDIBLE MUSHROOM

YOU CAN FIND DELICIOUS, OYSTER MUSHROOMS AT HIGH-END MARKETS — OR YOU CAN HARVEST THEM FOR FREE IN MANY WOODED AREAS.

By Anna Thibodeaux

Amid the waving willows along the levee of the Mississippi River in Ama is a delicacy that Randy Lauve has harvested since he was a kid.

Oyster mushrooms can be elusive, but Lauve knows how to find them.

"The best time to pick them is during the winter on a cool, foggy morning," he said. "Once the sun hits them on a sunny day, they're not good anymore."

Pleurotus fungi, a genus of gilled mushroom includes oyster, abalone or tree mushrooms, is wild but also the most commonly cultivated edible mushrooms because they are delicious. You can buy oyster mushrooms at Rouse's in New Orleans for \$7.99 a pound.

But this mushroom hunter loves them — wild.

"They grow on rotting trees . . . downed willow trees," Lauve said. "But they've got to be fresh, and you've got to get them right away."

Lauve gathers them from willow trees the way his grandfather taught him. And, now, his 21-year-old son helps gather them — just the way Lauve showed him.

They seek out willow trees where the mushrooms are typically plentiful, although he's observed a decline in their number along the river in recent years. They are easier to identify, making it safer to harvest them. Being able to identify any mushroom is important to avoid consuming the poisonous or even hallucinogenic varieties, but Lauve has years



A colony of oyster mushrooms adorns the trunk of this tree.

of experience identifying them.

In appearance, they don't have the look of a typical mushroom, but rather resemble a mushroom cut in half sticking to the tree, he said. They have an oyster-shaped cap, hence the name, with gills that run down the stem. They typically grow in a shelf-like formation with overlapping clusters that are white to light brown with firm, white flesh. They smell slightly sweet, like licorice.

It's literally second nature to Lauve having grown up on a farm.

"I've picked some probably as big as your head," Lauve said. "I don't really like the big ones like that but prefer the smaller ones no bigger than your hand because they're tender."

The bigger ones have a skin that is typically removed, but he considers them tougher.

He could harvest other wild mushrooms, but he prefers the taste of the oyster mushroom.

"It's the only kind that I use," Lauve said. "I cook a lot of wild game. My wife doesn't eat

Randy Lauve of Ama has harvested Oyster Mushrooms along the Mississippi River since he was a kid.



much of that, but she likes the mushrooms."

He's serious about this menu. Lauve's dishes have included rabbit, squirrel, duck, nutria and even raccoon (smoked coon gumbo), as well as rattlesnake (sauce picante). And, yes, they include oyster mushrooms.

"They're also real good fried," he said. "My favorite is them on the grill."

His grilled mushrooms include a tantalizing mixture of butter, garlic and Italian dressing.

In his many adventures on the hunt, Lauve did recount a close call with the mushrooms.

Lauve was on his four-wheeler behind the levee on a little trail he uses where he typically finds them when he spotted a branch extending from a tree loaded with the mushrooms. But it was 30 to 40 feet high so he went on in search of more accessible mushrooms and, when he didn't find them, returned to the site of his big find and discovered the branch had fallen after he left. Had he stayed, it might have fallen on him.

"That's the weirdest thing I've ever seen," Lauve said. "Maybe God wanted me to have those mushrooms. I don't know. That was crazy." ■

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TRY THREE BAITS FOR MARCH BASS

JIGS, SPINNERBAITS, C-RIGS ARE TOPS

By Dustin Wilks

Nothing gets you fired up like the anticipation of bass fishing in March. There is no better opportunity to get on lots of giant pre-spawners and catch them on a variety of lures.

Three patterns have always seemed to be among the best to fish in March.

First, Carolina-rigged lizards are great baits for probing points and other structure at any depth leading into spawning

areas. With fish moving every day this time of year, you never know for sure what depth they'll be. The Carolina rig maintains contact with the bottom at all times and can clue you in fast. They were really popular several years ago and are kind of out of favor now, which sparks my interest in the technique.

Second, spinnerbaits are at their best in March if the water comes up, gets some color to it, or if it is windy. Since March is



Dan Kibler

ABOVE: Don't miss the chance to fish any laydown tree you find in the water during the March pre-spawn. **INSET:** It's tough to beat a spinnerbait when the water is dingy to muddy in the early spring.

nearly always windy, spinnerbaits should be considered a top choice. Always fish big laydowns or pole timber in the back of pockets with this bait. If the water is in the bushes, watch out! You could be in for the best fishing of the year with a spinnerbait. Pay special attention to flooded, dead brown grass we call "hay." I use double willow-blades in sunfish or natural shad under normal conditions. If the water is muddy, then I go with double Colorado blades. I like the half-ounce size best.

Finally, flipping jigs in shallow heavy cover will net you your share of lunkers this month. Remember, bass are always on the move in during this prespawn phase, searching

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for food and a good place to spawn. When they venture shallow, they'll stop in heavy cover to rest and feed. Nothing gets in and catches them better than a jig. You might even discover there is an early spawn going on, especially if there are flooded willows around.

When jig fishing, you need to use heavy line and rod to get them out of the cover. I like to use a 7-foot-6 Daiwa LT flipping rod with 7-to-1 Zillion reel for most of my flipping, paired with 20-pound test fluorocarbon — or 65-pound braid if you're a braid guy.

For flipping jigs, most fishermen use a fairly heavy weed guard to avoid snags and a sharp, strong hook. I start with a 3/8-ounce jig and will go up to as much as an ounce to penetrate the predominant cover. If you are fishing mostly logs, a 3/8- or half-ounce jig will work fine most of the time. I like several types of trailers. For smaller jigs, I choose Culprit's new Tailgate special. For large jigs, you'll find me still using some of the larger pork rind trailers.

Swimming jigs can also be deadly in and around heavy cover if the bass are more suspended. I mostly use a quarter-ounce swim jig and a grub or small trailer. Some fishermen even use swimbaits on the back for a different action. I use with the same flipping rod and line when swimming jigs.

These are just three of the lures I like in March. You can throw the whole tackle box at them this time of year. Bass are feeding and moving into new areas, so they are susceptible to being caught on anything. Stick with the best lure for the conditions and for your confidence, and you will be rewarded with great catches. ■

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By Sam Davis

MOVE, MOVE, FOR SPECKS



Spring speckled trout will move miles to get away from muddy water because they need water with higher salinity.

Dan Kibler

WHEN WATER RISES, GETS MUDDY IN SPRING, HUNT UNTIL YOU FIND THEM

March Madness means something completely different for a speckled trout fisherman. Watching river flood-stage levels steadily climb and salinity levels drop will drive a fisherman mad.

Jimmy Barnes of Sportsman's Junction Outdoor Adventures in Long Beach avoids the madness by staying on the move. "When the rain shuts down our bite in

the bayous where my partner and I had been catching two-man limits of bigger than average trout," Barnes said, "we figured that all the freshwater, along with the warmer-than-normal water temperatures, had pushed our spring transitional period up by at least a month."

Shallow bayous holding less than 10 feet of water do not provide a layer of clean, salty water for trout to hunker down in after a heavy rain event, Barnes said.

"Unlike some of the bayous that have good stretches of deep water with good drop-offs, the small, deep holes in the bends of the bayous we fish are not large enough to hold enough bait to support a trout's needs for any extended period, so they basically get flushed out toward the bay like they would when they start their normal spring transition," he said.

So when the bite slows after an influx of fresh water, Barnes starts moving toward the bay until the bite picks up.

"We started checking some of our spots out closer to the mouth of the bay, closer to the front that had cleaner, salty water," he said. "The fish we did find were scattered more in smaller pods, so staying mobile and a making lot of casts was key in catching a decent box of fish."

"We would stay on the move, tossing MirOlure TTRs to cover as much ground as possible. When we hit some fish, we would stick the boat and sit on them casting, TTRs and Ultra Violet Matrix Shad soft plastics on ¼-ounce Hoosier Hooker jigheads until the bite

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quit; then we would be on the move again trying to find another group of fish."

Bait presentation is another key to success.

"We always try to fish either across or with the current and let the current drift our bait right to the fish," Barnes said. "I really like throwing my jig across and slightly upcurrent and drift it down with the current through where I feel the trout are holding, much like a fly fisherman would in a stream."

It is difficult to sit in one spot and limit out this time of year, according to Barnes. Look for clean water and fish the entire water column before moving on to the next area. If clean water is nowhere to be found, look for shallow water adjacent to deep drop-offs.

This is a difficult time of year to catch trout for even the most seasoned trout fisherman so don't get mad — get moving. ■

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Make sure you match the specifications of your boat, and how you plan to use it, to the trailer that you buy new or plan to fix up.

TRAILER TACTICS: MAKE SURE THE SHOE FITS

By Jerry Dilsaver



One of the most-overlooked aspects of purchasing a boat is the trailer. Oh, if it's a used boat, you may walk around the trailer and look for obvious rust or problems and maybe even kick the tires, but rarely does anyone check further or ask any questions. When the purchase is a new boat, there is even less discussion of the trailer. Many folks have the opinion that if the dealer has the boat on that trailer, it is the right one.

These are rather naive ways of approaching this, and they can cause problems down the road — no pun intended. You're the person who will suffer the inconvenience of simple trailer issues and who stands to suffer the most if there is a major incident, so you should be aware of your trailer needs and the options available to be sure you get what will service you best. First, if you're buying new, tell the dealer how you intend to use the boat, so he can match the trailer to your plans. One of

the first things to be considered is where you will be using the boat. Any material, from painted steel, to galvanized steel and aluminum should hold up well for a trailer that will only be used in freshwater. However, saltwater and brackish water are more corrosive, and galvanized steel or aluminum is better for that kind of use. Aluminum is preferred for constant saltwater use, with galvanized steel fine for occasional salt dips. Aluminum is lighter for the same strength and can help ease the load on the towing vehicle, regardless of where the boat is used.

Once the trailer material has been chosen, the trailer must be matched for length, width and weight. Length and width aren't difficult; the boat will always be the same length and width.

Matching the capacity of the trailer to the boat's weight is extremely important, and it is where most people, including dealers, make their mistake. Unfortunately, this is also the area most likely to cause problems. Few people overestimate the weight of their boat. Most underestimate a boat's weight,

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often severely, and when a trailer is overloaded, there is potential for frame, axle, spring and tire failure.

The weight the trailer has to carry includes the boat and everything that might be in it: boat, motor, fuel, batteries, safety equipment, any freshwater, fishing gear, coolers, ice and accessories. These things combine for far more weight than most folks realize.

For example, let's use a twin-engine center console, 23 to 25 feet long, as a starting point. This boat should weigh about 4,250 pounds. Two 4-stroke, V-6 outboards will add another 1,200 pounds, 200 gallons of gas adds 1,400 pounds, a pair of heavy duty marine batteries adds 125 pounds, safety equipment (including anchor, chain and rope) adds another 150 pounds, 30 gallons of freshwater adds 250 pounds, fishing gear (including cast nets) adds 250 pounds, any watersports gear would roughly be the same as fishing gear, a couple of coolers with ice, food, and drinks would add 100 pounds, ice for the fish box would add about 100 pounds, and finally add roughly 100 pounds for general accessories and miscellaneous items.

Suddenly, your 4,250-pound boat is up to 7,925 pounds and requires a trailer rated at a minimum of 8,000 pounds — much heavier than you imagined.

My personal suggestion is to have a trailer that exceeds your weight requirements a little. When you strike a nasty pothole or one of those nasty maintenance areas, the extra strength of a heavier trailer will often get you through without incident. The thing I remember when justifying the extra cost is that when something breaks, it will be me stuck on the side of the road, trying to do repairs instead of fishing.

Once you have chosen the right trailer, the boat needs to be positioned to distribute the load properly. The term

continues on page 162



Runners or bunks can be beefed up and shifted around the meet the needs of different boats to be towed.



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used for proper positioning fore and aft is “tongue weight” — the amount of weight on the coupler, with the trailer level. To adjust this, fill up the fuel tanks and load up all the fishing tackle and supplies you’ll have in the boat while towing.

Trailer-hitch manufacturers, vehicle manufacturers and trailer manufacturers all offer guidelines for their products. The ideal tongue weight is approximately the mid-point of where all the

recommendations overlap. Typically, the mid-point will be somewhere between 3 and 7 percent of the total weight of the boat and trailer.

Continuing our example above: the 7,925-pound boat load is on an aluminum trailer that weighs 700 pounds itself, so a 5-percent tongue weight would be 431 pounds. Be sure to check this with the trailer level. Also, when moving the boat to change the

tongue weight, do it slowly. An inch or two can make a big difference in weight distribution. Move the boat forward to increase the tongue weight and backward to lighten it.

The most-overlooked part of setting up a trailer is getting it level behind the tow vehicle. This can be fudged some with light loads and single-axle trailers, but is very important with trailers that have multiple axles — and critically so on trailers with torsion axles. The tongue weight is set with the trailer level on the ground, and to maintain the correct tongue weight, you must tow the trailer in a level position. This also helps distribute to load evenly to all tires on multiple-axle trailers.

The trailer level is checked by connecting the trailer to the tow vehicle and measuring the distance from the frame rails to the ground at both ends of the trailer. This takes into consideration how the tow vehicle settles with the trailer attached. The axle(s) create a pivot point, so a change on one end will produce the opposite change on the other. Make any changes in small increments. A difference of approximately an inch is generally acceptable between the ends of the trailer. If the trailer won’t balance perfectly, a slight tongue-high attitude is preferred to a tongue-low attitude. ■

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BP190045

By Jeff Burleson

WHITETAIL SCOUTING STARTS NOW

WITH DEER SEASON IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR, TAKE A LOOK

Hopefully, this past deer season resulted in trophies for many hunters and plenty of venison for many more. Just as they do every season, a few mysterious bucks evade the sights of the serious hunters and survive. For some hunters, thinking about outsmarting a trophy buck ends on Jan. 13 or Feb. 15, depending on where you hunt in Mississippi, but post-season scouting is a tremendous way to understand where big, mature bucks reside and why they show up in these areas.

Mature bucks live into maturity because of their keen senses. Without their premier sense of smell, deer would never reach maturity. Post-season scouting allows hunters to detect the patterns of big bucks on their property and to prepare for the



Finding a concentration of rubbed trees can give a hunter an idea where a buck that survived the season might have a bedding area.

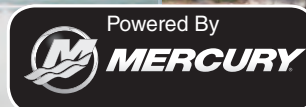
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following season without crippling chances during the season.

Too often, hunters scout heavily during the preseason and the hunting season itself. Mature bucks will quickly change their travel patterns when too much unnatural disturbance occurs within their core areas. Post-season scouting allows hunters to unravel the story and prepare for the next season without the

worry of moving a buck out of any area.

Feb. 1 is the prime day to start scouting for next year across most of the Magnolia State. While specific bucks frequenting an area will probably not be around next fall, hunters can locate the key areas that attracted the mature bucks. Finding areas with heavy doe use will coincide with buck sign. For simplicity, does need adequate food and water adjacent to cover in areas with little human disturbance.

Start investigating major food sources, including heavily-used food plots, mast-production areas, agriculture fields, and other major food sources. Observe the level/direction of tracks and major/minor travel lanes entering and exiting feeding areas. Closely observe the minor travel routes paralleling the major travel routes. These minor travel routes are generally used by bucks over does. Follow these travel routes to bedding zones, noting accumulations of rubs and scrapes within these areas and identifying possible staging areas and landscape funnels between each of these destinations.

Note the travel trails used by mature bucks with large rubs and thick tracks. These rub lines typically have a pattern to them and will be used by other bucks the following year.

Bucks rub trees to establish dominance within an area and to mark their bedding area. Bedding areas utilized by bucks will be peppered with rubs on almost every available sapling/tree within thick cover. Knowing bucks' bedding areas is important.

While food plots and feeding areas are often targeted for stand locations, the staging areas and funnels are more productive for daylight encounters, but they are a little tricky getting to without causing too much commotion.

Mature bucks will not arrive at feeding areas until after nightfall as hunting pressure increases. Identify the staging areas and funnels, closely-observing buck sign and sites for potential stand locations. Look for trees overlooking natural shooting lanes for stands where you can have quick and easy access during the season. Don't choose stand locations immediately adjacent to bedding areas, which are sacred — especially for mature bucks. Early in the season, while pressure is low, deer will bed on the very edge of the cover. Make sure stand locations are far enough

away from the bedding areas to prevent spooking these deer while entering and exiting the stand.

As good ambush locations are found, erect stands and clear/trim shooting lanes and hunter access routes to reduce disturbance during the deer season when disturbance needs to be low as possible. Take note of how to approach stands with the wind coming from different directions. ■

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Bigger baits and lures will typically produce bigger early spring crappie, according to guides and tournament fishermen across the Carolinas.



David A. Brown

USE BIGGER BAIT FOR BIGGER SLABS

BIG LURES, BAIT WILL APPEAL TO BIG CRAPPIE

By Dan Kibler

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to handle a really big crappie. A local fisherman, a retired preacher in his 80s who spends almost every morning on the pier at a municipal lake, caught a 3-pound, 7-ounce slab that broke the lake record.

The fish was around 18 inches long and fat as a Thanksgiving gobbler, but what struck me most about that crappie was the size of its mouth. There was little doubt in my mind that the slab could have easily swallowed a golf ball, and it wouldn't have surprised me if he could get a goose egg back to the crushers in his throat and at least choke on a tennis ball.

That made me think about the size of baits we use for crappie, and what a couple of Carolina slab hunters think about them.

"Have you ever looked at the mouth on a big crappie?" asked Maynard Edwards of Yadkin Lakes Guide Service. "It's not that small. It can swallow a pretty good-sized bait."

"Shoot, I've caught a lot of big crappie on crankbaits, and two of the biggest I've ever caught, close to 3 pounds, were when I was trolling 3-inch grubs for stripers at Badin Lake."

Tom Sprouse, a crappie pro, said big baits mean big crappie.

"I'm a firm believer in big baits," he said. "With big baits, you weed out little fish. I know a lot of crappie fishermen believe bigger fish are more aggressive to larger baits."

"I know if you clean crappies, you'll be surprised at the size of the shad that are inside them."

"I know they're very aggressive; I've caught them with big shad tails sticking

out of their mouths."

Edwards upsizes from a 2-inch to a 3-inch soft-plastic grub and the larger, off-set hooks that come on Slider jigheads.

"Most of the hooks you find on jigs are No. 6s," he said. "I've gone to No. 2, and I use the Slider head. I think they'll hold a big bait better."

Sprouse goes with a bigger bait, often adding a live minnow.

"I'll use a Kalin grub and tip it with a No. 6 minnow," he said. "Most people by No. 4 minnows, because they can get more of them per pound, but you can buy No. 6s."

"I'll use a No. 2 hook; there are people I know who will use a No. 1. If fish are real aggressive, you can get away with a 3-inch grub, but I normally thicken with a 2-inch grub and add a bigger minnow. The combination of the grub and minnow does it for me." ■

MARCH IS TIME TO FERTILIZE SMALL PONDS

By Jeff Burleson

With spring just around the corner and water temperatures on the rise, pond owners should proceed to the next level of their continual improvement program. The water tests from January and pH correction in February have prepared ponds for nutrient enrichment to fuel micro-organism growth and overall pond productivity.

Beginning at the microscopic level, fertilizer treatments promote growth of phytoplankton that are eaten by water insects and continue up the food chain resulting in big fat bream and lunker bass. A fertilized pond will provide three to four times the fish as an unfertilized pond, or 300 to 400 pounds per acre.

Fertilizer should be available throughout the growing season; a series of treatments can be made, or the pond can be treated at one time using a time-released version. Treatments should be scattered throughout the pond. The first application should be in early March, just as the growing season begins and waters begin to warm. Soon after the fertilizer treatments and the first bloom, the water clarity will decrease. As the water clears up and visibility increases to greater than two feet, secondary treatments can begin.

The key ingredient in pond fertilizers is phosphate. Treatments should contain a high ratio of phosphate, such as 0-46-0. As a general rule, granular or powdered fertilizer can be added at a rate between five and seven pounds per

acre. If liquid fertilizers are used, they should be diluted before distribution and should be prescribed at a similar ratio.

If the pH has not been corrected with limestone treatments, fertilizers should not

Fertilizing small ponds this month will kick-start growth at the bottom of the food chain that leads to healthier fish populations, good fishing.

be added. Phosphate amendments will only be effective if pond pH is approaching 7 or above. Water pH should always be corrected prior to fertilization. ■

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Courtney Bush caught this monster bull red, 30.71 pounds and 43 1/2 inches long, while fishing the Bradford Ware III Memorial Fishing Rodeo out of Grand Chenier. It was Courtney's first redfish and ended up winning the tournament.

GOT PHOTOS? WE WANT 'EM

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Digital images must be at least 200KB and in jpeg format.



Courtney Bush



Caden Hays

Caden Hays with an albino squirrel he killed in Caldwell Parish while he was hunting with his papaw.



Cody Coco

Cody Coco killed this 8-point in Avoyelles Parish. It had a 21 1/4-inch spread and scored 145 5/8.



Graham & Jonathan

Graham Howard and his dad Jonathan with Graham's first redfish caught in Delacroix.



Stephen & Christopher

Stephen Parker and Christopher Wilson got into a big school of trout and reds while wade fishing at Last Island out of Cocodrie.



Emily Adams

Emily Adams with the 8-point she killed on Dec. 27 at Davis Island. The big buck was 6 years old, weighed 235 pounds, had a 22-inch spread and scored 142 B&C.

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FIRST DEER



Grace Zeringue

Grace Zeringue, 11, dropped a spike buck in his tracks for her first deer. It was killed on Nov. 4 with a 7mm-08.



Kailye Temple

Kailye Temple was hunting on a small piece of land in Livingston owned by family friend Justin Stanga when she took her first deer, an 8-point at 120 yards, on Jan. 12, 2019.



Austin Norman

Austin Norman, 7, shot his first deer this season at a friend's lease in Brookhaven, Miss. A hunter for life was born that day!



Wyatt Breaux

Wyatt Breaux, 8, killed his first deer on Nov. 18, 2018 in East Feliciana Parish while hunting with his dad.



Rhylinn Stelly

Seven-year-old Rhylinn Stelly poses with her first deer. It was taken in St. Martin Parish.



Abigail Whitam

Abigail Whitam, 16, killed her first deer on Jan. 19 near Crosby, Miss. She made a near perfect shot at 200 yards.



Chloe Carnevale

Chloe Carnevale was 11 when she killed her first deer. She shot the doe at 60 yards with a 7mm-08 on Oct. 28, 2017 during the youth weekend in Tensas National Wildlife Refuge.

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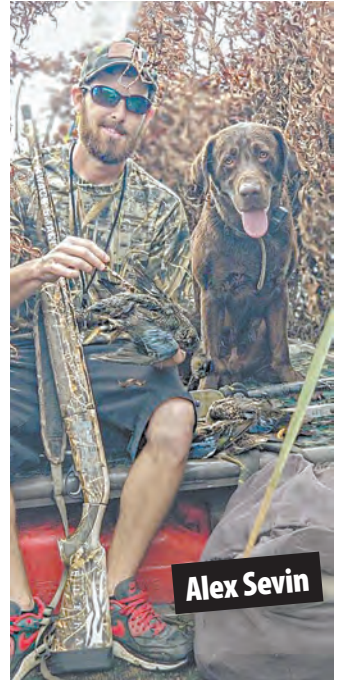
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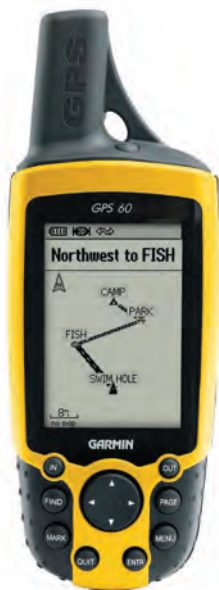
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Alex Sevin

Alex Sevin with a banded teal he took on the last day of the 2018 teal season in St. Mary Parish.

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Andrew Richard

Andrew Richard killed this big buck on Nov. 10 with a crossbow at 66 yards in West Feliciana Parish.

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Tristen Ball

Tristen Ball killed this 8-point in Grant Parish while hunting with his paw paw, Steve.



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**Wesley
Oliveaux**

Wesley Oliveaux was fishing with his brother Hayden at a private pond in St. Francisville on March 5 when he got this bass weighing in at 5 pounds 8 ounces.



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2019

These regulations are unofficial. For official regulations, always check the Department of Wildlife & Fisheries pamphlet and/or the federal pamphlet. www.wlf.louisiana.gov



SALTWATER

STATE REGULATIONS (0-10.357 miles^Δ)

FISH Species	Minimum Length	Bag Limit (per person)
Greater Amberjack*~	34" FL	1/day*
Lesser Amberjack, Banded Rudderfish*	14-22" FL	5/day (aggregate)
Yellowfin Tuna	27" CFL	3/day
Bluefin Tuna	73" CFL	1 per vessel per year*
Bigeye Tuna	27" CFL	None
Blue Marlin	99" LJFL	None
White Marlin	66" LJFL	None
Sailfish	63" LJFL	None
Swordfish*	29" CL or 33 lbs. DW	5 per vessel per trip
Cobia (ling or lemon fish)	33" FL	2/day
Drum, Black	16" TL	5/day#
Drum, Red (redfish)	16" TL	5/day#
Flounder, Southern	None	10/day
Grouper* Gag ^Δ & Black ^Δ	24" TL	4/day (aggregate)*
Scamp ^Δ	16" TL	
Nassau & Goliath	UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS	
Yellowfin ^Δ	20" TL	
Red ^Δ	20" TL	2 of 4 grouper total
Atlantic Sharpnose & Bonnethead shark@	None	1/day
Other sharks (except prohibited species)@	54" FL	1/day/vessel/aggregate
King Mackerel*	24" FL	3/day
Spanish Mackerel*	12" FL	15/day
Striped mullet	None	100 pounds/day
Black seabass	None	None
Hogfish	14" FL	5/day
Seatrout, Spotted (Speckled Trout)	12" TL*	25/day*
Red Snapper*	16" TL	2/day*
Other Snapper		5 mutton in 10 snapper aggregate
Mutton Snapper	18" TL	
Cubera, Yellowtail, Gray (mangrove)	12" TL	10 in aggregate*
Queen, Blackfin, Silk, Wenchman	None	
Vermilion Snapper	10" TL	
Schoolmaster, Dog, Mahogany	None	None
Gray Triggerfish*	15" FL	1/day in aggregate
Lane Snapper	8" TL	
Almaco Jack, Goldface Tilefish, & Blueline Tilefish	None	20/person/day in aggregate*
Blackline Tilefish, Anchor Tilefish	None	
Tripletail	18" TL	5/day

CFL = curved fork length LJFL = lower jaw fork length CL = carcass length
DW = dressed weight LJTF = lower jaw to tail fork FL = fork length

FRESHWATER

FISH Species	Minimum Size Limit	Bag Limit (per person)
Crappie	None	50/day*
Buffalo Fish	16" TL	25/day
Freshwater Drum (Gaspergou)	12" TL	25/day
Channel Catfish	11" TL*	***
Blue Catfish	12" TL*	***
Bowfin	16" TL	None
Flathead Catfish	14" TL*	***
Crawfish	None	150 lbs./day
Paddlefish	30" max LJFL	2*
Shad	None	50 lbs./day
Black Bass (largemouth & spotted)	None*	10/day*
Striped Bass or Hybrid Striped Bass	**	5/day*
Sturgeon	UNLAWFUL TO POSSESS	
White Bass	None	50/day*
Yellow Bass	None	50/day*

* see exceptions in pamphlet.

** no more than two may exceed 30 inches.

*** catfish limit is 100 in aggregate; however, 25 fish in aggregate may be undersized.

only one fish may exceed 27 inches.

@Shark season is closed between April 1 and June 30.

^ Closed season for gag grouper Jan. 1 - May 31. Closed season for black, red, yellowfin,

yellowmouth & scamp grouper from Feb. 1 - March 31. ~ Greater amberjack season is open May 1-31 and Aug. 1 - Oct. 31. " Closed season on gray triggerfish Jan. 1 - Feb. 28 and June 1- July 31.



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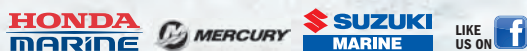
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Astro Tables is far more effective than "moon tables," because it takes into account critical solar energies as well as lunar.

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

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

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

AVAILABLE PRODUCTS:

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

and-valleys forecaster. Includes rise and set times for the sun and moon, space to log your catches, "Timely Tips," plus fish and game symbols showing you each month's don't-miss periods. Also includes exclusive summary charts revealing the best and worst days of 2019, the year's best periods, a look ahead at 2020, and more. Comes with FREE 2019 Astro Tables pocket calendar, which sells separately for \$8.95, plus \$3 s&h.
Book: "How to Know When to Go" by Rick Taylor. \$14.95 (plus \$4 s&h). 100 pages, 43 illustrations. A comprehensive look at the main factors influencing fish and game activity periods, plus how to devise an effective when-to-go game plan using any year's PrimeTimes calendars. Individual assessments of bass, panfish, deer, turkey, and more.

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2019		BEST DAYS			VALUE
MOON	SUN	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	
Fri 1					18
Sat 2					19

Sun 3					29
Mon 4					39
Tue 5					51
Wed 6					58
Thu 7					51
Fri 8					44
Sat 9					39

Sun 10					37
Mon 11					40
Tue 12					43
Wed 13					51
Thu 14					63
Fri 15					54
Sat 16					49

Sun 17					60
Mon 18					68
Tue 19					78
Wed 20					81
Thu 21					67
Fri 22					53
Sat 23					39

Sun 24					32
Mon 25					29
Tue 26					31
Wed 27					40
Thu 28					28
Fri 29					23
Sat 30					22
Sun 31					24

25 50 75
AVERAGE

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LUNAR PERIODS				TIMES OCCURRING AT NIGHT ARE SHADED	
MOON RISE	PRIMARY MOON OVERHEAD	MOON SET	PRIMARY MOON UNDERFOOT		
3:39 am	8:16 am - 9:14 am	1:50 pm	8:41 pm - 9:39 pm	LOW	
4:26 am	9:02 am - 10:04 am	2:42 pm	9:27 pm - 10:29 pm	LOW	

5:08 am	9:46 am - 10:54 am	3:36 pm	10:11 pm - 11:19 pm	Apogee	
5:46 am	10:27 am - 11:45 am	4:31 pm	10:52 pm - 12:10 am	Apogee	
6:20 am	11:07 am - 12:35 pm	5:26 pm	11:32 pm - Midnight	NEW	
6:52 am	11:43 am - 1:25 pm	6:21 pm	Midnight - 1:00 am	NEW	
7:22 am	12:17 pm - 2:15 pm	7:17 pm	12:08 am - 1:50 am	NEW	
7:51 am	12:53 pm - 3:05 pm	8:13 pm	12:42 am - 2:40 am	NEW	
8:21 am	1:27 pm - 3:57 pm	9:09 pm	1:18 am - 3:30 am	NEW	

9:52 am	3:03 pm - 5:49 pm	11:07 pm	1:52 am - 4:22 am	DST	
10:25 am	3:42 pm - 6:42 pm		3:28 am - 6:14 am	DST	
11:01 am	4:27 pm - 7:37 pm	12:07 am	4:07 am - 7:07 am	DST	
11:43 am	5:14 pm - 8:34 pm	1:08 am	4:52 am - 8:02 am	DST	
12:32 pm	6:07 pm - 9:33 pm	2:10 am	5:39 am - 8:59 am	HALF	
1:27 pm	7:06 pm - 10:32 pm	3:11 am	6:32 am - 9:58 am	HIGH	
2:29 pm	8:07 pm - 11:29 pm	4:09 am	7:31 am - 10:57 am	HIGH	

3:37 pm	9:12 pm - 12:24 am	5:03 am	8:32 am - 11:54 am	HIGH	
4:48 pm	10:16 pm - 1:16 am	5:52 am	9:37 am - 12:49 pm	HIGH	
6:00 pm	11:22 pm - Midnight	6:37 am	10:41 am - 1:41 pm	Perigee	
7:12 pm	Midnight - 2:04 am	7:17 am	11:47 am - 2:29 pm	Perigee	
8:22 pm	12:26 am - 2:48 am	7:55 am	12:51 pm - 3:13 pm	Perigee	
9:30 pm	1:29 am - 3:31 am	8:31 am	1:54 pm - 3:56 pm	Perigee	
10:37 pm	2:29 am - 4:15 am	9:07 am	2:54 pm - 4:40 pm	Perigee	

11:41 pm	3:30 am - 4:58 am	9:45 am	3:55 pm - 5:23 pm	Perigee	
	4:28 am - 5:44 am	10:25 am	4:53 pm - 6:09 pm	Perigee	
12:43 am	5:24 am - 6:30 am	11:08 am	5:49 pm - 6:55 pm	Perigee	
1:41 am	6:17 am - 7:19 am	11:54 am	6:42 pm - 7:44 pm	HALF	
2:35 am	7:10 am - 8:08 am	12:44 pm	7:35 pm - 8:33 pm	LOW	
3:23 am	7:58 am - 9:00 am	1:35 pm	8:23 pm - 9:25 pm	LOW	
4:07 am	8:44 am - 9:50 am	2:29 pm	9:09 pm - 10:15 pm	LOW	
4:46 am	9:25 am - 10:41 am	3:24 pm	9:50 pm - 11:06 pm	Apogee	

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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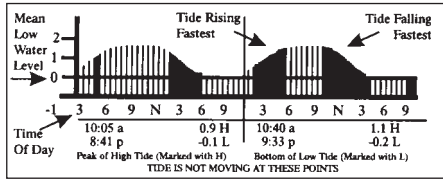
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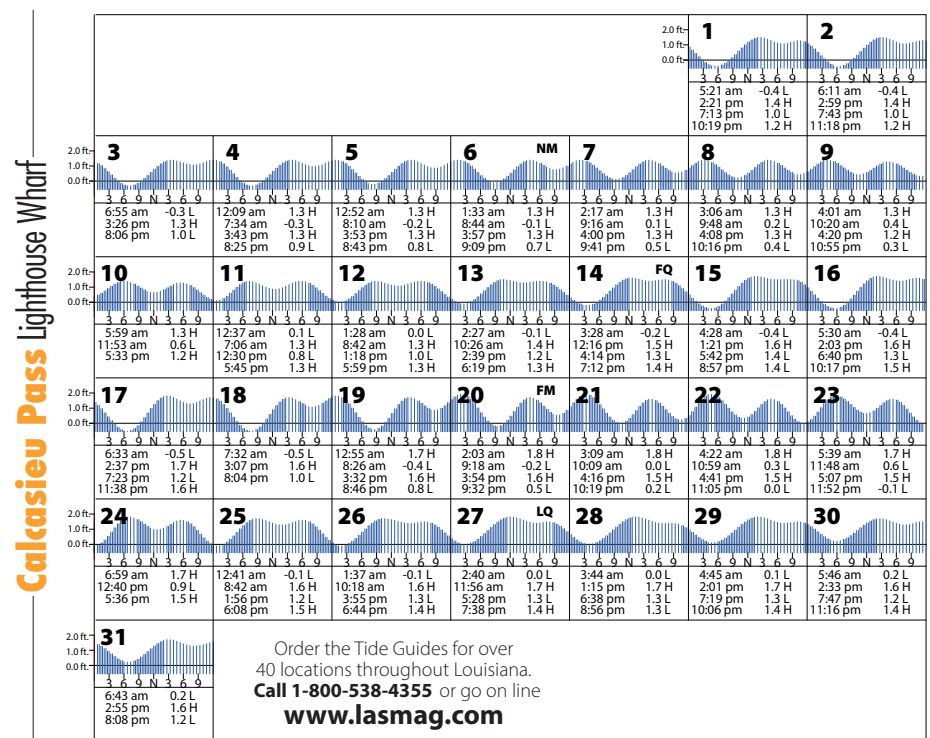
How to use the SPORTSMAN Tide Guide



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Tide Corrections

Location	HIGH	LOW
Barataria Pass	+1:00	-0:10
Bastian Island	+0:41	+0:12
Bay Gardene	+2:51	+2:44
Bayou BonFouca	+9:59	+10:11
Breton Islands	+0:54	+0:48
Caillou Boca	+0:40	+0:48
Caminada Pass	+0:20	+0:12
Chandeleur Light	+0:37	+0:34
Chef Pass	+5:17	+5:07
Cocodrie	+1:22	+1:33
Comfort Island	+1:34	+0:54
Delacroix Island	+3:42	+3:31
Empire Jetty	-1:03	-1:45
Four Bayou Pass	+2:18	+0:17
Gardner Island	+0:40	+0:47
Grand Pass	+1:48	+1:16
Head of Passes	-0:48	+0:00
Hopedale	+4:17	+4:56
Independence Island	+2:29	+1:59
Jack Bay	+1:59	+1:28
Joseph Bayou	-0:36	-1:37
Lafitte	+1:45	+2:51
Long Point, Lake Borgne	+2:28	+2:11
Manila Village	+2:32	+3:13
Michoud Substation	+5:24	+5:02
New Canal (Bucktown)	+10:34	+10:49
North Pass	-0:31	-0:37
Paris Road Bridge	+5:53	+5:58
Pelican Islands	+2:26	+2:26
Pointe a la Hache	+3:12	+3:01
Port Eads	-0:17	-1:37
Raccoon Point	-0:03	-0:20
Shell Beach	+4:32	+4:25
Ship Shoal Light	-1:54	-1:50
South Pass, Miss. R.	-1:13	-1:20
Southwest Pass, Miss. R.	-0:38	-1:33
Tchefuncte River	+10:23	+11:01
Timbalier Island	+0:19	+0:23
Wine Island	+1:08	+1:02
Calcasieu Pass, Lighthouse Wharf	HIGH	LOW
Cote Blanche Island	+4:33	+3:40
Eugene Island	+1:49	-0:39
Lighthouse Point	+0:58	-0:53
Mermentau River ent.	+0:20	+0:25
Point Au Fer	+1:53	-1:02
Point Chevreul	+3:16	+0:30
Rabbit Island	+2:01	-0:36
Shell Island	+3:08	+0:45
South Point	+1:55	-0:33
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