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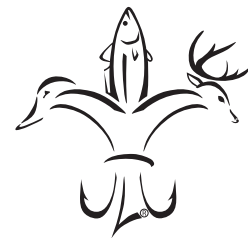
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17
2017-18
Deer of the Year

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PUBLISHER: Tony Taylor

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Mark Boyd

MANAGING EDITOR: Bobby Cleveland
bobbyc7754@yahoo.com, 601.506.0739

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Alicia LaFont

PRODUCTION DIRECTOR: Jeff Caldwell

ASSISTANT PRODUCTION MANAGER:
Desiree P. Lewis

ART DIRECTOR: Rodney Anouilh

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS:
Jeff Cashio, Kevin Orgeron, Alissa Zeringue

CONTROLLER: Juanita Guidry

SALES DIRECTOR: Tony Taylor
504.416.7621/tonyt@lasmag.com

ADVERTISING SALES:
Mark Hilzim (National Sales), Jay Forrest,
Asa Faulkner, Brent Comardelle, Mark Boyd,
Greg Webb, Ron Dorsey, Bret Holden

CONTRIBUTORS:
David A. Brown, Andy Crawford, Jerry Dilsaver,
Paul Elias, David Hawkins, Bill Garbo, Phillip
Gentry, Michael O. Giles, Chris Ginn, Dan
Kibler, Tommy Kirkland, Sammy Romano, Hal
Schramm, Don Shoopman

CIRCULATION DIRECTOR:
Ricky Naquin 985.859.7744/rickyn@lasmag.com

CIRCULATION FIELD MANAGER:
Tim Stiglets 601.434.1526/timstiglets@comcast.net

ADVERTISING INQUIRIES:

Contact Tony Taylor
email: tonyt@lasmag.com/504.416.7621

SUBSCRIPTIONS OR SUBSCRIPTION ISSUES, CALL 1-855-371-1546

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985.758.7217

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Finn Norsworthy, 10, from Brandon, was sitting in a double-ladder stand with his father, Mike, when he arrowed this 162-inch buck this past October.

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Outdoor UPDATE with Bobby Cleveland



Bobby Cleveland has covered sports in Mississippi for over 38 years. A native of Hattiesburg and graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi, Cleveland lives on Ross Barnett Reservoir near Jackson with his wife Pam. He can be reached at bobbyc7754@yahoo.com.

FEBRUARY SHORT, BUT SWEET

THE EMPHASIS IS ON SMALL GAME, BUT THERE'S A LOT OF ACTION TO BE FOUND OUTDOORS IN MISSISSIPPI

David Hawkins

For most Mississippi sportsmen, February's short 28-day page on the calendar suits them just fine since it limits the downtime between deer and turkey seasons — and believe it; a day or three makes a difference to them.

But for others, the quickest month of the year passes far too fast. They would be the small-game hunters and a few quirks, the outdoorsmen and women who aren't die-hard deer hunters, enjoy some fast action and don't mind working a little bit to find it.

- They stalk squirrels either with or without a dog.
- They follow beagles that follow rabbits in a loud, boisterous chase.
- They can turn on obnoxious electronic callers and hope the repetitive owl-and-crow fight and shotgun blast cacophony will attract crows before a hunt-ending, ibuprofen-needed headache sets in.
- They can hope a pointer can find a covey of quail or a few singles.

- They can stomp through the marsh hoping to jump snipe.
- They can plow through knee-deep gumbo mud in the Delta to shoot all the light geese they want to shoot.
- They can keep right on hunting wild pigs.

They've waited all fall and winter, trying not to compete with deer and/or duck hunters, bidding their time for when they can have the upland and bottomland timber to themselves.

"I know it's perfectly legal to hunt squirrels during deer season, but I don't do it much and not at all when they're gun hunting," said Jimmy Harris of Jackson. "What I don't want to do is have a confrontation, and I'm not talking about a physical or argumentative confrontation. I just don't want to interfere with their hunt, and I don't want them interfering with mine.

"I like to squirrel hunt on my feet, without a dog, stalking slowly through the woods. If I run into a guy 30 feet up a tree with a bow, I can pretty much just keep going

and hunting. Not him. His day is pretty much shot. I've tracked scent all through his area. He's done, and he's not going to be happy. My fault? Am I in the wrong? No, not if I'm not trespassing, but I feel bad just the same."

Added small-game hunter Tommy Gore of Oxford: "I hunt public land. I fear deer hunters with big guns. You read at least once a year that one has mistakenly shot another one. Nope, they can have it until February."

That's why when Feb. 1 rolls around and deer season is closed in most of the state, the small-game hunters race to get in the woods.

It's also a time, especially in south Mississippi, when bass fishermen know they have their best shot all year at a double-figure largemouth — anything over 10 pounds.

Let's look at all the opportunities, and keep an eye on Jackson, where the legislature is in session and could impact how, when and where we enjoy the outdoors. ■

OPPOSITE PAGE: February has some unique opportunities for Mississippi sportsmen, most notably squirrel hunting.

BUSHYTAILS BEST BEWARE

Mississippi's No. 1 small-game animal remains the squirrel, although hunting pressure continues to plummet. The number of squirrel hunters in the state has dropped by half over the past 50 years.

"For the life of me, I don't understand that," said Jimmy Harris, 63, a lifelong squirrel hunter from Jackson, who hunts primarily in Hinds, Madison and Warren counties. "When I was a kid, we all squirrel-hunted, and we did it all fall and winter. We had a ball, and I still do. I don't understand this rush to take kids to a deer stand when they are four, five or six years old.

"When did it quit being fun to follow a good squirrel dog? When did it quit being fun stalking squirrels alone? When did fathers decide their kids got a better understanding of nature from a ringside seat in a wooden shooting house than they would be in the field of play?"

The loss, Harris said, goes well beyond sport.

"It's just an entire generation gone from the woods, one that won't learn the importance of habitat conservation and that won't develop a concern about or form a relationship with nature," he said.

And, Harris said smiling, "They may never know the joy of a pot of squirrel stew or squirrel and dumplings. That would be a shame."

January's early reports from squirrel hunters and from observant deer hunters bode well for a February stroll through the woods.

"I'm lucky enough to have a few friends with small blocks of timber where I can squirrel hunt throughout the deer season," said William Watson of Meridian. "That land is scattered across Mississippi, from the Delta to the Tenn-Tom (Waterway) and from Tupelo to the Coast.

"I have only had two disappointing days

squirrel hunting, and they both came from the southeastern corner of the state in early October. Their deer season doesn't start until Oct. 15, so I can get a couple of good public-land hunts in, but this year it was poor. I couldn't find any squirrel to speak of. There was one day when I would have failed to kill a squirrel for the first time in — heck, I can't remember when — but I shot one 50 yards from the truck when I was leaving. Everywhere else, I had no trouble getting five or six, and most days if I had time, I got a limit of eight."

Watson said the woods in the East Central, Northeast and Delta areas are "slam



A dying art, it might seem, squirrels remain Mississippi's top small game target.

Bobby Cleveland

full of squirrels, like there was a squirrel explosion. I hunted one 50-acre block in Monroe County four days over two weeks and limited out in under three hours each time. One only took 75 minutes, less than 10 minutes per squirrel." ■

NEW SQUIRREL OPPORTUNITY

Beginning this month, about 520 acres below the dam of Barnett Reservoir will be open to limited, youth-oriented squirrel hunting. It will be the first legal

MISSISSIPPI SQUIRREL SEASON

Where: Open statewide.

When: Ends Feb. 28.

Limit: 8 per person per day.

hunting for bushytails in the area in over half a century.

"It will only be open on weekends in February, after our draw archery deer hunts have completed, and then open again daily for the spring squirrel season May 15 to June 1," said Craig Hunt, Pearl River Valley Water Supply District's Director of Parks and Recreation. "Since the area is small, the board elected not to allow squirrel dogs during the hunts."

At least one youth, aged 15 and under, who has satisfactorily completed a hunter education course, must be a member of each hunting party and must be under the direct supervision of at least one adult over 21, who has a valid hunting license or is exempt.

No rifles of any type, including .22 rimfire and air-powered guns, will be allowed. Only shotguns with No. 4 shot or smaller will be allowed. Hunters must sign in and out at the deer weigh-in station at the PRWSD shop off Spillway Road, and park only in designated areas. The daily limit and legal hours will follow statewide MDWFP regulations. ■

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Once Feb. 1 rolls around, rabbit hunters with a good pack of dogs are some of the most popular sportsman in the world. Deer season is over, and invitations to hunt rabbits come in almost daily.

Bobby Cleveland

THE OTHER SMALL GAME

February is also a great time to own a pack of rabbit dogs.

"Yes, since all of a sudden we become the most-popular people around," said Eric Peterson of Clinton. "You have a solid pack of beagle rabbit dogs, and the phone starts ringing around the last week of January with people wanting to know if I'd be interested in hunting at their place — if, of course, they can come along — in February.

"Overnight, rabbit dog owners go from having to hunt places to hunt, to having so many places offered. Once Jan. 31, is gone, and it's Feb. 1, it's like a whole new world."

Obviously, it's because deer season closes Jan. 31 in most of Mississippi. Only in the southeast corner are deer allowed through Feb. 15.

February is also a good time to be a raccoon hunter and to have a first-rate coon dog.

"Even though we only hunt at night, people are reluctant to let us run our coon dogs on their property during deer season," said Phillip Jones of Brandon. "But, boy, let us get to February and then it's like, 'What you been waiting on? Get over here with that dog!'

"Who I hear most from are turkey hunters who have seen a lot of raccoons while deer hunting at their hunting camp. Raccoons love to steal turkey eggs from the nests in April and May, and that makes them the No. 1 predator of turkey in Mississippi and an enemy of turkey hunters."

While there is an eight-rabbit per hunter per day limit, there is no limit on raccoon, opossum or bobcat in February while the trapping season is open. Like squirrel hunting, the season ends Feb. 28 for rabbits, raccoons and trapping. ■



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THREE EARLY HUNTING BILLS ARE FILED

The Mississippi Legislature convened on Jan. 2, and only a handful of bills were filed and sent to the House and Senate Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks committees. Only a few of those would have any impact on most sportsmen.

One that would be H.B. 170, which would add a week to the end of the regular squirrel season. The bill would move the annual closing date from Feb. 28 back to March 7 and, curiously, lower the bag limit from 8 per day to 3 per day during that March 1-March 7 period.

"I can understand the extra days, for extra opportunity, but why the lower bag limit?" Jimmy Harris said. "That makes no sense to me, at all. It sounds like they are only doing it to give squirrel dog owners a chance to run their dogs another week. To be honest with you, it really isn't worth the time and trouble for a regular hunter like me to get up and go to only get three squirrels, not when I have to take a day off from work to go."

Added Eric Peterson, "Why wouldn't they also give us another week of rabbit season?"

In the Senate, S.B. 2052 would not require any resident of Mississippi who is an honorably discharged veteran of military duty to purchase a hunting/fishing license. While it sounds like a nice gesture, the question is how much money would that cost the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks. That agency's budget is based primarily on license sales.

Not only would it reduce the direct sales revenue, but it would also impact negatively on the share of federal funds given to Mississippi through the Dingell-Johnson Sportfish Restoration Act and the Wallop-Breaux Wildlife Restoration Act. That revenue, collected

via taxes on hunting- and fishing-related equipment at the corporate level — is paid to state wildlife and fisheries agencies based partly on licenses sold and partly on acreage.

One other Senate bill, S.B. 2103, would offer a slight change in deer limits for hunters aged 75 or older. This legislation would allow older hunters to fill their annual buck limit with any antlered deer, including those that do not meet minimum antler requirements set for different regions.

The deadline for introducing new

legislation was Jan. 15, and the deadline for the House and Senate to take up floor action on bills originating in their own house is Feb. 8. The 2018 session is a short session, ending on April 1.

To find bills introduced and then track their progress through the system, visit www.legislation.ms.gov. On the Home Page click on the prompt for "Legislation" and then find bills by author or by Senate or House committees. For outdoor-related bills, check the Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks committees in both the Senate or House. ■



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APPLY NOW FOR WMA TURKEY HUNTS

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks will accept applications through Feb. 15 for Wildlife Management Area permitted turkey hunts.

All applicants must apply at www.mdwfp.com/draws and have a valid WMA User Permit to apply. WMA User Permits are available for purchase at www.mdwfp.com or may be purchased anywhere hunting licenses are sold.

Participating WMAs include Bienville, Black Prairie, Canal Section/John Bell Williams, Caney Creek, Canemount, Caston Creek, Copiah County, Leaf River, Malmaison, Sandy Creek, Sunflower, Tallahala, Twin Oaks, Upper Sardis, Ward Bayou and Yockanookany.

Youth-permitted hunts will take place on Canemount, Charles Ray Nix, Natchez State Park, Sardis Waterfowl and Sunflower.

Mississippi's 2018 spring turkey season opens for youths ages 15 and under on March 8, and for all hunters on March 15. ■



Abbye Hughes, 15, killed this turkey on March 26, 2017, while hunting with her dad in Clarke County. The gobbler had a 10-inch beard and 1¼-inch spurs.

Hunting/Fishing **SCRAPBOOK**



Adam Law with a big buck killed in Monroe County on Dec. 3, 2017.



Chase Cochran killed this 8-point buck on his property in Wayne County on Nov. 19, 2017.



Peggy Evans of Merigold took a perfect shot to down this 10-point buck with six stickers. It weighed over 200 pounds and had a 20½-inch wide rack. She was hunting in Leflore County with her husband on Dec. 16.

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Cold-water bass fishing on Barnett Reservoir will be tested by Bassmaster Central Open anglers.



LOTS OF B.A.S.S. TRAFFIC ON BARNETT

Bobby Cleveland

The Barnett Reservoir area will be more colorful in February, as will the streets and hotel parking lots in nearby communities.

The Bassmaster Central Open season begins with a three-day event on the 33,000-acre lake on March 1-3, and since Opens carry no off-limit period on tournament waters, most of the estimated 250 pro fishermen in the boater division will be expected to visit in February.

"Generally, we start seeing boats come in a few months out, especially guys who have never fished here before," said Myron Watson, co-owner of Performance Outboards on Highway 43, just across the road from Barnett's most-popular bass

launch spot, Goshen Springs Landing.

"They come in to learn how to get around, where they can and can't run on the lake," Watson said. "They ride around more than anything else until it gets close to the tournament time. Then they come in and start learning where the fish are at that time, and then trying to figure out where they will be when the tournament starts."

That could make an already crowded lake even more crowded in February. Local tournaments start around the first of February and continue with as many as two or three per weekend. The prespawn crappie fishing, which is rated as some of the best in the world, also generates a lot of traffic in February.

"Heck, it's nothing people around here aren't used to," Watson said. "There's always a crowd on Barnett. We even had them during the ice in January, and they were catching fish, too."

The Bassmaster Central Open, whose local hosts are the City of Ridgeland Tourism Commission and the Barnett Reservoir Foundation, will be staged out of Madison Landing in Ridgeland. Boats will launch daily at sunrise, and Thursday's and Friday's weigh-ins will be held at the Landing beginning around 3 p.m. For Saturday's final weigh-in, the event moves to Pearl and the Bass Pro Shop parking lot.

There will be no charge to attend any tournament-related function. ■

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FEBRUARY FISHING HOT SPOTS

The second month is a transition period for many Mississippians, who trade their bows and firearms for poles, rod and reels. Any little stretch of decent warm weather and, wham!, it's on.

"One of the best months of the year, and that goes for both bass and crappie," said bass pro Pete Ponds of Madison. "That's when the biggest fish, the females, are at their biggest. Their bellies are full of eggs and food. They have to take advantage of good feeding conditions and eat what they can find to build up strength for the coming spring spawn."

Ponds knows that any time we have two, three or even four warm days in a row, bass will go from lethargic to active, getting more so with each warm day.

"I don't know that there's a better time all year to fish than to have a multiple-day warm front in February," he said. "The first day, they might turn on late in the day. The second day they will start earlier, and by the third or fourth day, they're feeding all day."

As a novice crappie angler, Ponds has found that "Those suckers always seem ready to eat, and cold temperatures only affect depth. If it's cold, I get right over brush piles and fish down in them. If it's warm, I go to the same place but start fishing shallower on top and over the brush. The fish will move up out of the cover and start looking for big schools of shad to follow."

With that kind of action in mind, let's look at five great February fishing trips in Mississippi.

• **PRESPAWN BASS, BILL WALLER LAKE, COLUMBIA:**

One of Mississippi's traditional big-bass lakes, this 160-acre pond in Marion County is a nice mix of surprisingly deep water, some of it immediately adjacent to spawning flats and even more of it adjacent to vegetation. That's a combination that puts the big fish in peril in February, when warm days start to appear as often as cold ones do. It puts fish in areas where they can go from deep to shallow immediately and without great travel. As



Robert Allen with a Marshall County hawg.

February progresses, start following ditches/creeks further into the shallows.

• **CRAPPIE, EAGLE LAKE, WARREN COUNTY:**

February on Eagle Lake is a prime example of when one lake really shines at one time of the year. While Eagle Lake is productive throughout the year, it's on fire in February. Been that way for over 70 years, and it will probably be that way the next 70. What makes it good is a dense population of threadfin shad, most of which suspended deep in the deepest waters of the lake (Mississippi side deep, Louisiana side shallow). Using modern electronics to find balls of shad and schools of crappie, has only made Eagle even easier to fish. Get ready to cover a lot of water and bring multiple poles to get maximum bait presentation at varying depths. On the coldest days, look under

the piers and boathouses on the Mississippi side for suspending black crappie. Hint: don't look too deep.

• **CRAPPIE, BARNETT RESERVOIR, NEAR JACKSON:**

A stable lake level and an abundance of fish-holding habitat make this 33,000-acre lake one of the nation's most productive crappie spots. Stability means there is no threat of a spawn loss due to changing levels. A well-defined river channel, two natural funnels and scores of old, oxbow lakes covered during the impoundment, provide Barnett crappie a world of hiding spots and fishermen places to look for them. In February, the fish are starting to migrate back toward their spawning grounds, and they use channels as highways. Early in the month, the fish will be on the edge of the river, but will be ganging up along the

mouths to the ditches and the creek channels they will use to move shallow later in the month. By end of the month, they will be well into the migration, hundreds of yards from the river.

• **PRESPAWN BASS, NESHOPA COUNTY LAKE, NEAR PHILADELPHIA:** This lake is a sure bet to produce several "bass of a lifetime" to lucky fishermen this month. The odds are better than one gets at the nearby Choctaw casinos. This lake was restocked in 2004-05 and reopened in 2006 after a complete renovation of the lake and its water-control structure. Each year, the original class of Florida bass, and probably the second- and third-year spawned fish, have grown bigger and bigger. In 2017, the current lake record of 14.3 pounds was set last February. The fish will still be relating to deep water, but will be moving ever-so-closer to the shallows for the upcoming spawn.

• **BASS, LAKE MONROE, NEAR ABERDEEN:** Think of this recommendation as a way to retune your body and mind to fishing, because this lake that reopened last June after a complete renovation and restocking is going to be hard to match for sheer numbers. If you only look for getting a bite, setting the hook and reeling in a fish, and doing it often in a day's time, visit this small member of the MDWFP's State Lake system. Be prepared to catch and release a lot of fish though. To protect the largemouth, the MDWFP requires all fish measuring between 14 and 22 inches must be immediately released. The daily creel limit is 10 bass per day, with only one exceeding 22 inches. ■



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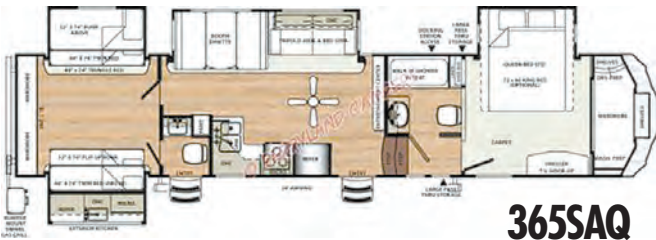
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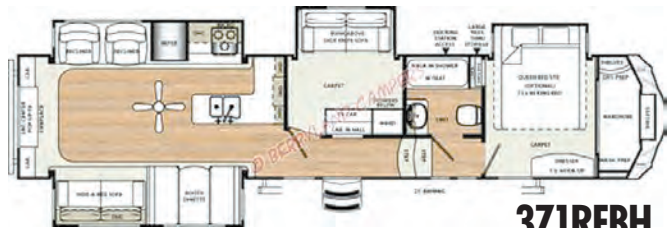


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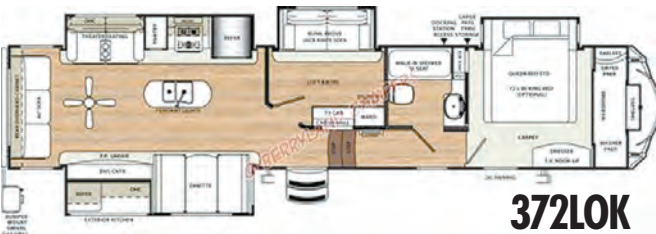
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DEER OF THE YEAR



Mike Norsworthy of Brandon was sitting in a double-ladder stand with his 10-year-old son, Finn, when Finn arrowed this 162-inch buck this past October.

MISSISSIPPI HUNTERS PUT PLENTY OF BIG BUCKS ON THE GROUND THIS PAST SEASON.

HERE ARE A FEW OF THE MOST NOTABLE:

GIANT 8 TAKEN IN PEARL RIVER COUNTY

By Bobby Cleveland

Matt Powe's buck is a sure-enough trophy for Pearl River County in southeast Mississippi.

Hey, at 148 inches, it's a giant 8-point anywhere.

Killed Nov. 28, the 6½-year-old buck is the fourth-largest ever killed in Pearl River County, according to the Magnolia Records Program.

"There's two 12-points and an 11-point that scored higher in the county, but he's definitely the biggest 8," said Powe, who lives in Carriere and works for Folger's Coffee in New Orleans, La. — "I don't drink coffee; I have to smell it all day," he joked.

Powe has a long history with the buck, dating back to 2012, when he first saw and got pictures of what he thought was a 2½-year-old basket 8-pointer.

"Turns out, he was just 1½ years old at that time, since we aged his jawbone this year at 6½," Powe said. "That's a pretty good young buck around here."

Powe didn't see the buck in 2013, and he's sure he'd have recognized it.

"It's got a lot of white color on his legs all the way to his feet, and I'm sure I'd have known him if I saw him," he said. "We moved some cams over to the other side of the road and then started getting pictures of him again. In 2014, he was an 8-point, maybe 115 to 120 inches."

That's still a good buck for Pearl River County, but one that showed great potential if left alone.

"He became a 9-point in 2015 with lots more length, height and mass, probably about 150 inches, and in 2016, he was still a 9-point, and we had him at about 156 inches," Powe said.

It was time to harvest the buck, and Powe moved in to this one particular area where trail cams had captured the most images of the buck during daylight hours.

"The property is mostly pine timberland that has been in the family a long time," Powe said. "There are some hardwoods in there that produce some food, but other than that, I don't know what he was eating. There's a big thicket across a fence on a neighbor's property, and I really think that's where he was living.

"Most of our pictures of him had him coming from the west to the east across that fence, so I went in there last year and set up a stand and started hunting him on southeast winds."

The game was on.

"I got one good look at him during the season; he was traveling with a smaller buck, like he usually did," Powe said. "The younger buck got spooked and jumped right when the bigger deer had gotten behind a big tree. The bucks turned and walked away, and he kept that tree between us. I didn't want to force it, so I let him walk away.

"I saw him one more time and could have killed him then. It was early February, but he had already shed one side of his antlers. I passed."

Powe said the big buck was peculiar for southeast Mississippi, not just for his size, but because he always dropped antlers in February, when most bucks don't shed until April.

"Of course, that means he started growing antlers earlier than other bucks, too, and by April, he already had brow tines



Matt Powe of Carriere killed this trophy 148-inch 8-point in Pearl River County on Nov. 28, ending a five-year relationship with the big buck.

growing,” he said.

Fast forward to the 2017-18 season. Powe was determined more than ever to take the buck, and he carried lessons from his 2016 failures to the woods.

“We had pictures, and he was still in the same area, on the same pattern,” he said. “He had dropped the ninth point and was back to an 8, which is why I think he scored just 148. He had the same width, height and length.

“I decided to back off on him after last year, when I hunted him so hard. This year, I moved the stand back 20 yards, and I quit hunting as often. I hunted him only five days in archery and two days in the gun season before I killed him.”

The story of the kill is, in Powe’s words, “kind of boring.”

With a southeast wind, Powe liked his chances.

“It was hot and dry, so I went at 1 o’clock, and he was the first deer I saw,” he said. “He came out at 5 o’clock, and I shot him before he had a chance to leave. I shot him immediately.”

At 30 yards, the buck was no match for the .30-30.

“I could have killed him with a bow at that distance, and he would have been the biggest bow kill in the county,” Powe said.

The 200-pound buck green-scored 148 and with great symmetry, there wasn’t much deduction. The main beams were 24 and 24½ inches, the G2s 10½ and 10½, and the G3s both 9 inches. The inside spread measured 19¾ inches. ■

BROOKHAVEN TEEN KILLS 200-INCH NON-TYPICAL

By Bobby Cleveland

JOSEPH BLALOCK’S FRANKLIN COUNTY GIANT CAME ON FIRST SOLO HUNT

Thirteen-year-old boys grow pretty quickly, practically all of them in size and some in savvy.

On Nov. 22, on his first hunt of the 2017-18 deer season and his first alone in a deer stand, Joseph Blalock of Brookhaven found out that he had grown significantly in both ways, overcoming one and displaying the other, perhaps more important trait, in taking one of the most impressive bucks in Mississippi this year.

The main-frame 12-point — with 17 scoreable points and about five more that don’t qualify for scoring but do hold a ring — grosses 205½ inches as green-scored by a certified Boone & Crockett scorer, who estimates a final net of about 191 to 192 inches after deductions.

All of it happened on a well-managed, small tract of family land in Franklin County, hunting with his father Tyler Blalock, an EMT, who carried his

son from his Rural Rapid Response Thanksgiving Party to the deer stand for an afternoon hunt.

“It was my first hunt of the season, and as we were putting our camouflage on, I realized I had outgrown my camo from last year,” Joseph Blalock said. “I had to use my step-mom’s.”

After the wardrobe adjustment, the Blalocks, dad and son, began strategizing the hunt.

“We talked about which stand I should hunt and how the wind would affect my hunt,” Joseph Blalock said. “We finally decided I would hunt a new stand, and my dad would hunt on the river stand. We talked a little more and discussed what to call the new stand. That evening we decided to call it the ‘Cross Stand’ because the food plot makes a crisscross pattern.”

That crisscross pattern would factor in the hunt later — much later in teenage time — the first two hours were

continues >



Madelyn Kavanaugh
Sept. 30
142 inches



Jordan Watts
Oct. 7
151 inches



Finn Norsworthy
October
162 inches

[MORE BUCKS >](#)

DEER OF THE YEAR



BROOKHAVEN 200-INCH CONTINUES

uneventful, and tedious for Joseph, who found ways to entertain himself.

"I struggled to shut the door, which was bent due to the weather warping the wood," he said. "The first hour I watched a handful of turkeys feed across the food plots my dad and I prepared earlier this year. I played with a wasp that was too cold to play back and broke some dirt dauber nests off the corner of the stand.

"By the second hour, I was playing on my phone and watching YouTube. I had to read the subtitles because I knew I could not turn the volume up without scaring any incoming deer away."

Finally, at about 4:30, a solitary doe entered the field.

"I watched as she walked on and off the food plot," he said. "My dad and I were texting back and forth as I told him about the doe. He asked if she put her tail up before she ran. I said yes, she did."

Worried that he had spooked the doe, ruining his afternoon hunt, Joseph Blalock was somewhat on edge. But, boy, did things change quickly and his anxiety lasted only seconds.

"About then, I turned to see if anything was behind me," he said. "There were two deer that had slipped out from the brush east of me. A big buck and a spike walked out at the same time and the same place. My first instinct was to grab my gun.

"I slipped my rifle up instantly, because I knew that the buck standing before me was at least a good 8-point, but I had no idea how great of a buck he really was."

Worried that the buck would not be in the open for long, young Blalock acted quickly. The food plot was a set of narrow lanes, and it wouldn't be long before the buck was out of sight.

"I shot him the first chance I got," Joseph said. "He wasn't broad-side, so I ended up shooting him in the neck so he wouldn't run off. I lined up the rifle my dad built for me, remembering all the important rules he taught me when shooting a deer. I squeezed the trigger and shot. He dropped in his tracks at about 70 yards.

"Just a minute before, I was wondering if my hunt would end with a doe walking out of the field. Then, BAM! The deer of a lifetime walked out."

A single shot from the AR-15 chambered in 6.8 SPC did the job. The buck dropped where he stood, and Joseph Blalock reached for his phone and text his dad.

"He texted me, and I called him," Tyler Blalock said. "I could tell by the text he was excited because he wasn't making any sense. I called him, and he said, 'Daddy, I don't know how big he is, but

he's outside the ears and he is really tall.'"

Tyler Blalock was wasting his time when he told the son to stay in the stand and wait for him to arrive. Joseph Blalock just had to go see the buck immediately.



Joseph Blalock, 13, of Brookhaven, took his magnificent buck on his first hunt of the season, which was also the first solo hunt of his life, in Franklin County on Nov. 22. (BELOW): The non-typical 17-point buck scores more than 200 inches gross.

Courtesy Suzanne Campbell



Stan Ethredge
Oct. 20
227 inches



Camden Lott
Nov. 11
162 Buckmasters-BTR



"I walked across the field, and I counted 18 points at first," he said. "I sent my dad a picture, which sped him up. I was so excited when he got there and we counted 20 points. We both freaked out."

"Dad left to go get the truck, but I stayed because I thought it was all a dream and I would wake up if I rode to the cabin with him. When my dad got back, he drove me and the deer up to the cabin."

That's when Blalock realized the full measure of what he had accomplished. People had begun to gather, and were waiting for the triumphant arrival.

"The news of killing a big deer must travel fast, because within 20 minutes, there was a crowd of about 13 people congratulating me," he said. "All of the neighbors told us about how they had seen him on

game cameras since this summer. They told us how the deer would stay on their land in the summer and would disappear when hunting season began."


Three scoring sessions indicate the buck's gross score is at the 200-inch mark, or just above it.

"We had a gross green score of 199%," Tyler Blalock said. "One was 203% and one was 205%. So, he's right around 200."

The score sheet from the largest measurement shows an inside spread of 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, and main beams of 25 and 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The right side had seven typical points; the left had five. The five non-typical points, all on the left beam, totaled 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches.

"I must admit, I'm still wondering if this was a dream," Joseph Blalock said. ■

MORE BUCKS >



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'DAGGERS' TAKES A DIRT NAP

By Andy Crawford

NATCHEZ HUNTER'S PERSISTENCE ENDS WITH 155-INCH JEFFERSON COUNTY BUCK

Natchez native Glen Williams set his sights on a huge main-frame 10-point once he saw the deer on trail-camera pics last summer. And that persistence paid off Dec. 24 when he downed the buck, which taped out at 155½ inches.

But it was a journey to kill the big-racked Jefferson County buck he and his camp buddies dubbed "Daggers" because of G2s and G3s that stretched about 10 inches.

"The first pictures I got of him were in August," Williams said, who also captured a video of the big buck when it was in velvet; that video can be viewed at MS-Sportsman.com.

"I was getting pretty consistent pictures of him, and then about a week before bow season started, he just vanished," Williams explained.

But that didn't bother the die-hard hunter too much; the photos provided clues to the buck's home range, so Williams focused his early season efforts on 200 to 300 acres of the property.

Bow season passed without another sighting, but trail cams captured photos of the deer again just before gun season opened.

"He was kind of in a different place," said Williams, who moved six of his cameras to the new area and redoubled his efforts.

"I was hunting every day I could," Williams said. "I was seeing a lot of deer, some bucks, but I didn't care what else was on the place."

Just before Christmas, he moved a camera to a major game trail just off a small pond near the edge of the property. A large thicket was on the adjacent land, and Williams had a hunch that was where Daggers was holding up.

"I had one picture of him at 4:30 a.m. crossing the path," Williams said. "As soon as I saw that picture, I knew he was bedding down in that thicket and feeding in the hardwoods on our property."

There was a single-man, ladder bow stand overlooking the pond, and he could look down the game trail from the stand.

On Dec. 23, four days after the picture of Daggers crossing the path was taken, Williams climbed into the stand with the plans of hunting there the entire weekend.

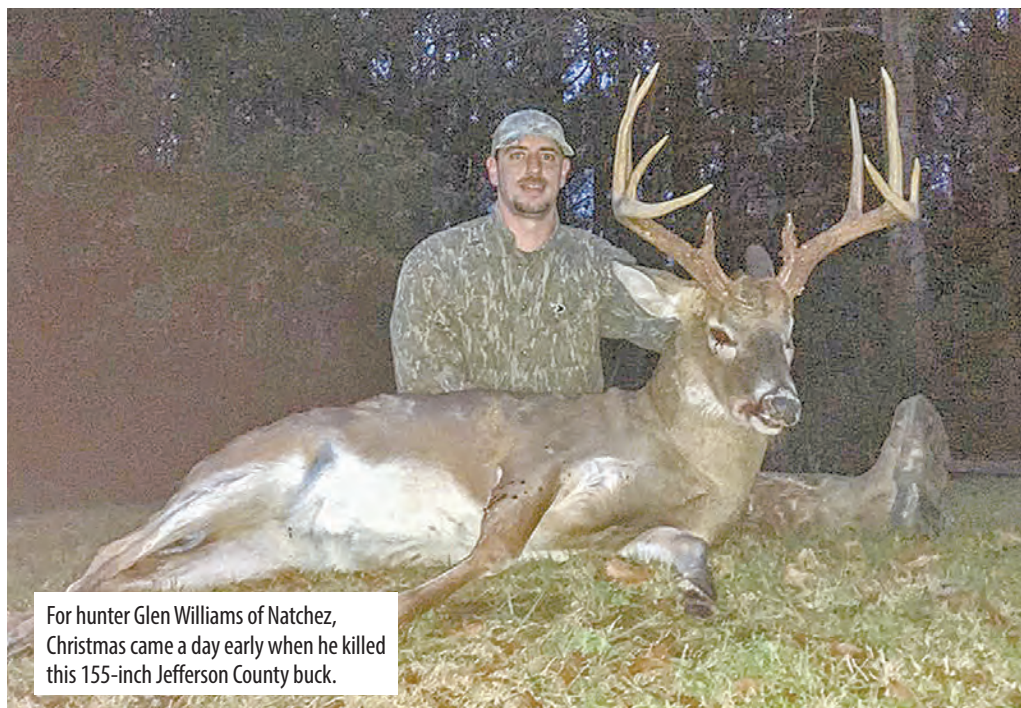
"About 7:30 a.m., a 5-point stepped out," he said.

Right behind the young buck was

The only available shot was through holes in the thicket as the big buck trotted away, but Williams wasn't willing to risk wounding the animal or ruining any future crack at the deer.

He sat until 12:45 p.m. and returned for the afternoon hunt in hopes the buck would return.

"I ended up seeing a nice 10-point, but I passed it up thinking I'd see (Daggers)," Williams said.



For hunter Glen Williams of Natchez, Christmas came a day early when he killed this 155-inch Jefferson County buck.

Williams' target.

"As soon as I saw him, I knew it was him," the hunter said. "He was right behind that 5-point. They were heading for that trail."

The little deer walked to the trail, offering a great shot. But Daggers didn't cooperate.

"I was thinking Daggers would do the same thing, but he didn't," Williams said. "He skirted the edge of that trail."

The next morning — Christmas Eve — Williams decided to shift positions a bit. He moved 60 to 75 yards from the bow stand, sitting on an Indian mound overlooking a 400-yard-long shooting lane that was a mere 10 yards wide.

"I got in there way before daylight," Williams said. "At 7 a.m., a doe stepped out on the lane at 325 yards. She had her tail up — not all the way up, but about halfway."

continues >



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DEER OF THE YEAR

'DAGGERS' CONTINUES

Williams figured the deer was in estrus, so he pulled up his rifle in case Dagggers trailed the hot doe across the narrow opening.

His hunch was correct, but the narrowness of the shooting lane came back to haunt the hunter.

"As I'm getting my gun up, he was stepping out," Williams said. "When I got my gun on him, he was stepping into the woods on the opposite side.

"The lane is only 10 yards wide, so if you'll miss your opportunity if you don't have your gun up and ready."

Knowing the buck would eventually walk back to his bedding area, Williams decided to remain ready.

"I told myself, 'He's going into our place, he's bedding in that thick — he's going to cross again,'" the hunter explained. "I literally sat with the gun up against my face for the next three hours."

During that long wait, he passed on three bucks.

And then, just after 10 a.m. a doe popped into his scope a bit more than 200 yards

away, heading back toward the thicket.

"She stepped out and had her tail about halfway up," Williams said. "(Dagggers) steps out, looking the other direction. As soon as I had (the crosshairs) on him, I squeezed the trigger."

The buck's reaction wasn't very promising.

"He was quartering away from me," Williams said. "I thought I missed him when I shot. His tail went up — not all the way, but it didn't curl down — and he didn't act like he was hit at all.

"I texted my dad that I had just missed him."

His father, who also was hunting on the property, encouraged Williams. So an hour later, the discouraged hunter eased down the lane to look for blood.

He didn't find any promising signs.

"For the next three hours, I combed the entire area," Williams said. "I didn't find any blood, no hair, nothing."

He went back to the camp, mad at the



Zac Carothers
Nov. 19
180 inches

MORE BUCKS >

world and convinced he had shanked the shot. In fact, he hunted the same place that afternoon before heading home because he had to work Christmas day.

"I had to drive on back with that empty feeling that I'd missed a deer of a lifetime, the buck I was after," Williams said.

"I was just sick. I went to work telling everyone I missed it."

Williams' father hunted the area the next two days without seeing Dagggers.

On the elder Williams' third morning

continues >

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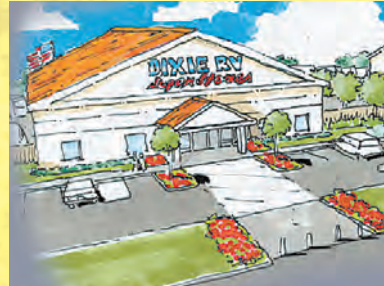


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'DAGGERS' CONTINUES

in the area, two buzzards flew over his stand. That made him wonder what the scavengers were after.

"He walked around to a little food plot, and it didn't take him two minutes once he went off the edge of the plot," Glen Williams said. "(Daggers) was 50 yards from where I stopped looking."

The animal hadn't even been picked at by buzzards or eaten by coyotes, a fact Williams credits to the extremely cold weather.

"He looked just like I had just killed him," he said. "He was frozen."

Why the deer didn't leave a blood trail is still a mystery.

"Remember, he was quartering away from me? I hit him 2½ to 3 inches back — not enough to get in the gut," Williams explained. "The exit wound was right in the (opposing) shoulder.

"I don't know why he didn't bleed."

Daggers was everything he hoped for. The rack was 17 inch wides and held G2s and G3s that measured 9½ and 10 inches long, and the main beams stretched the tape to 22¾ and 23½ inches.

"He's a main-frame 10-point with three or four kickers," Williams said.

The bases measured 6½ and 7 inches in circumference.

"He's got real good mass," Williams said of the 235-pound deer. "He was much a man." ■



Ben Pearson
Nov. 26
167 inches

MORROW SCORES ON 160-INCH CLAY COUNTY BUCK

By Bobby Cleveland

THE DAY BEFORE SEASON-ENDING SURGERY, HIS BOSS TAKES HIM HUNTING AFTER LUNCH

When Jason Morrow tells his big-buck story, he uses many of his words thanking his boss for helping him take a 160-inch trophy in Clay County on Dec. 14.

"It was just another work day until my boss, Jason Williams, and I went to lunch," Morrow said. "He looked at me and said 'Let's go to the woods.' He knew I was having knee surgery the next day, and it was the last time I'd get to hunt this season."

Not only did the boss suggest the hunt, Williams also offered to take Morrow to his hunting camp.

"So we finished lunch and went back to get my truck and head out," Morrow said. "At 3 o'clock, I picked him up at his house, and we headed north to his hunting property north of West Point. When we got there, I noticed that I didn't have my golf cart key, so we pushed it off the trailer so we could get to the four-wheeler that my buddy Matt Bishop owns. He's my normal hunting buddy, and thank goodness I had his ATV and keys."

Morrow and Williams loaded up the ATV and headed to the woods, where Morrow called an audible that put him in just the right place at just the right time.

"He dropped me off at the stand I nor-

mally go to, but I decided to go to the stand across the creek in some beautiful hardwoods," he said. "It's pointed in the opposite direction and I can't see any of the hardwoods that (his usual) stand is in."

Morrow climbed down and went to the other stand.



Jason Morrow killed this huge Clay County buck on Dec. 14, one day before knee surgery that ended his deer season.

"I settled in the stand about 3:30ish and broke out my new grunt call," he said. "I grunted with it twice just to make sure it worked, and about 3:50, I saw this buck moving through the hardwoods directly

in front of me, but I couldn't get a shot on him. He was moving to fast, and all I had were small shooting lanes."

Morrow scanned the lanes, judged the deer's movement and made a plan.

"I got ready for the only place that I could get a good shot on him to the right of where I was facing," he said. "When he got there, he slowed down, so I grunted at him and he stopped. I got him in my scope on my new 7 Mag — my first time to hunt with my new rifle — and shot once.

"He did a complete flip, so I knew he was down, but I couldn't see him with my scope or through my binoculars."

Morrow immediately sent a text to Williams. It was 3:55.

"I told him I had one down and that I thought he was an OK buck, because at that time I didn't exactly know that I had just killed a monster, as Dad would later call him," Morrow said. "So at 4:15, I was still shaking, but I had to see if he was down.

"I got down and eased towards him slowly so I wouldn't spook him if he was still alive. As I got closer, I saw his white belly and I looked through my scope to see if he was moving. To my surprise, he wasn't. I still took it slow walking up to him and saw that he was not breathing."

Morrow was stunned when he saw the antlers, which had a combination of mass, palmation, and a lot of typical and several atypical points.

"Needless to say, that's not the end of this adventure, because then I had to get him out of the woods and across a creek," he said. "Jason met me at the creek where we normally cross, but the beavers had dammed it up so much that I had to find another place to cross to Jason and where the deer was. So I jump on the 4-wheeler and find a spot to get across, pick Jason up on the other side and we go to the deer.

"As we pull up, Jason says,

"Oh my God, that's the biggest deer that's ever been seen or killed out here. He was more excited than I was because I was still in shock."

The two men took some pictures, loaded the deer up, and Morrow headed back to the creek crossing. He knew it was not going to be easy, and he was right.

"I gave the 1999 Big Bear 350 all it had to get up the hill and we, the deer and I, are doing a wheelie all the way up the bank," he said. "As we reached the top, we almost flipped backwards. I put all of my weight to the front, and it comes down safely, and by the grace of God we made

it back to the truck."

The buck's next stop was a taxidermist, where a quick, unofficial measurement produced a gross score of 160 inches. It had an 18½-inch inside spread.

"What an amazing day and amazing response from family, friends and my Facebook family," Morrow said. "I was truly blessed. I want to thank Jason Williams for taking me hunting with him and not being mad at me for killing this amazing buck on his club, and for being my friend, and to Matt Bishop for his amazing 4-wheeler." ■



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COLD

Low temperatures can concentrate catfish, help anglers this month on the Tenn-Tom Waterway.

By Phillip Gentry

KITTIES

February is one of the toughest months to be outdoors. On the hunting side, many seasons are finished, and what big and small game that is available has seen a lot of traffic in the woods.

On the water, the traffic is not as high, but neither are water levels, and most fish are pretty dormant until water temperatures come back into at least the 50s.

The one shiny exception to the winter doldrums might be catfishing. Joey Pounders, a veteran angler from Steens — not far from the Columbus Pool of

and Pounders said he'll take the colder water, with its higher oxygen levels, every time. What is of more importance is current, something that has been hard to come by of late.

"We just haven't had a lot of rain, so there's not a lot of water coming in or being moved, so there's no current," Pounders said. "Grenada Lake is as low as I've seen it in years."

Pounders said a lack of current is often a good thing when trying to catch trophy flatheads. He said it's a fallacy that flatheads don't bite in the winter; he has



Blue catfish have no problem filling their bellies at an alarming rate when the water is cold, making them a prime winter target.

the Tenn-Tom Waterway — said the best months to be on the water chasing trophy sized blue and flathead catfish are from the fall until March, making February a prime fishing month on the river system.

"Cold water doesn't really hurt the catfish bite," Pounders said. "If anything, it makes the fish concentrate more into specific areas, and that is a great thing if you can pinpoint those locations."

Compare that to June, July and August,

caught flatheads in single-digit weather.

Again, knowing where to look is the key. "My best pattern for flathead fishing in February is going to be standing timber in the 25- to 30-foot depths," he said. "Most of that depth and structure will be in the old river runs off the main channels, whether you're talking about Columbus, Aliceville or Pickensville. The main runs get dredged but aren't as deep; 15 feet is about the maximum for the main channels."

Trip info: The Tenn-Tom Waterway

WHERE TO GO — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Mobile District maintains a listing of public access areas all along the Tenn-Tom Waterway from Pickwick Lake to Mobile Bay. Each of the 10 pools and lakes has at least one public access area; most have many. To view a listing of public access areas visit the Recreation page at <http://tenntom.sam.usace.army.mil/Recreation.html>.

BEST TACTICS — The best idea for catching catfish along the Tenn-Tom Waterway is to find current breaks that offer shelter for catfish when current is running. Expect current to change daily and even hourly with barge-traffic flow. Patterns may also change from day to day, so it's best to be taking notice of what's working on that day and look for other locations to apply what you've learned. Blue catfish favor bridge pilings, laydowns and other man-made structure, while flatheads prefer more quiet water. While not always a rule, cut shad works best for catching blue catfish, while live whole shad, and sometimes fresh-cut shad will be best to tempt flathead catfish.

MARINAS — Bay Springs Marina, Mile 412, 662-728-2449, www.bsmarina.com; Midway on the Tenn-Tom, Mile 394, 662-862-7306, www.midwayonthetenntom.com; Columbus Marina, Mile 335, 662-327-8450, www.columbusmarina.com.

MORE INFORMATION — Tenn-Tom Waterway Development Authority, P.O. Box Drawer 671, Columbus, MS 39703, 662-328-3286, www.tenntom.org.

ACCOMMODATIONS — Mississippi Division of Tourism, 1-866-SEE-MISS (733-6477), www.visitmississippi.org.



Pounders said flatheads will bunch up during winter, but they will still feed. He has caught five to six big flatheads — even as many as 10 — from an area no bigger than 30x30 feet. The secret is to keep trying spots. Give each location no more than about 20 minutes, and then move to the next one.

“I’m going to put baits out around the bases of those trees and along any blue rock shelves in the area,” Pounders said. “Live bream and skipjack will work, but I’d much prefer to have big, live shad straight out of the lake for bait.”

As soon as seasonal rains begin, Pounders looks forward to being on the water targeting blue catfish when the current flow increases. The best areas, he said, are flats off the main channels both above and below the dams. This target area includes 2 miles on the lower, downstream side of each lock and dam and up to 5 miles to the upstream side of each facility.

“Blue catfish will relate to the channel edges, and when current is present — particularly when they haven’t had much current in a long time — they’ll be up on the edges of those channels,” said Pounders, who lets the wind dictate which side of the dam he fish: the downstream side on windier days and the upstream side on calmer days.

“We’re looking for fish in transition, but the pattern will change daily,” he said. “Just because you caught fish on Friday doesn’t mean you’ll catch them on Saturday in the same location. You have to learn and adapt while you’re fishing.”

Pounders always has been and always will be an anchor-down-and-spot-fish angler. Other anglers have success trolling or bumping for catfish, which both cover more water than he can cover by jumping spots, but he also prefers to give the fish



Blue catfish will key on current and current breaks when feeding.

at least a little time to make a decision.

“I can reach a lot of water anchored in one spot,” he said.

“Especially using the 10-foot catfish rods I use, I have a lot of leverage to put baits exactly where I want and then give the fish time to decide. That extra time means a lot in colder water.” ■

ANCHOR PROBLEM SOLVED >

B’N’M OFFERS CATFISH GEAR

Several years ago, West Point-based B’n’M Poles, famous for crappie rods, entered the catfishing market with its own line of catfish rods for serious catfish anglers. The lineup includes the Silver Cat and the Silver Cat Magnum in longer sizes, as well as its new Bumping rod.

In addition to the rod offerings, B’n’M is also offering catfish tackle designed by renowned catfish angler George Young Jr. The lineup includes terminal tackle weights, including bank sinkers, cannon ball sinkers and no-roll sinkers in a variety of sizes.

For rigging purposes, B’n’M also offers pre-rigged, three-way swivels to accommodate the more-popular catfishing tactics like bumping, bottom-bouncing, slow-trolling and anchored fishing.

Finally, the new offerings include Young’s own signature series of hooks, from smaller, eating-sized catfish hooks to trophy fetching 9/0 circle hooks. Each one is extremely strong and sharp to catch and hold even the biggest catfish.

“The catfish market is growing and we saw an opportunity to provide some tackle offers from a top notch tournament angler,” said Jack Wells, B’n’M’s president. “This takes the guesswork out of how to rig for the different ways to catch catfish, and it’s proven quality tackle.”

For more information visit www.bnmpoles.com. ■



B’n’M Poles recently released its lineup of George Young Jr. Signature terminal tackle for catfish enthusiasts.

Photo courtesy B’n’M Poles

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STRONG DESIGN SOLVES ANCHOR PROBLEM

Steve Strong, a veteran catfish angler, has lost count of the anchors he has sacrificed to the Mississippi River. With its myriad of rocks, logs and debris, the river bottom is tough on anchors. At over \$100 a pop for commercially made anchors, he, like many catmen, makes his own anchors using steel tubing and half-inch rebar.

Even at the lower level of expense, he still hates parting with those. That's when Strong, who works for ABMB Engineers, decided to do a little engineering of his own.

"I shackle a chain to the center of the flukes on the bottom of the anchor," he said. "Then I run that chain up the shank of the anchor and use a plastic zip tie to attach the chain to the eyelet on top of the shank."

If all goes well with the anchoring, Strong's anchor performs like any other anchor. It is retrieved by putting the boat in reverse, and pulling out the anchor. However, if by some twist of fate or current, the anchor remains hung, all Strong has to do is apply enough force to break the plastic zip tie.

"It's easier to picture if you think of an umbrella," Strong said. "You hold an umbrella by the handle but if it sticks, then I can pull hard enough to break the plastic tie and then I'm pulling the umbrella up by the top, there's no resistance from the flukes and it'll pull loose from whatever it's hung in." ■



Grapple anchors work best when the claws dig into the bottom structure, but they can also get hung and can be lost.

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THOROUGHLY WORK EACH SPOT

Fan-casting to tempt winter catfish is more than just a random presentation of baits. Once the boat has been anchored, catfish anglers must target specific features within reach of the boat.

"I'm almost always going to anchor around some kind of channel or break line," said Chris Simpson, a veteran catfish guide. "I might place a rod forward on the break line and another rod on the back of the boat on the break line. Then I'm looking for additional structural targets like rocks, old logs or other cover."

In order to target these locations, Simpson arranges rod holders around the perimeter of his boat so that he doesn't have to worry about crossing lines.

"You want to anchor parallel to the break line; that gives you the best options," he said. "One trick I learned a long time ago when catfish are tight to cover is to slowly reel the bait back to the boat after the line has settled to the bottom. I want to bump the weight into the structure, then I'll give that line a little slack and leave it there."

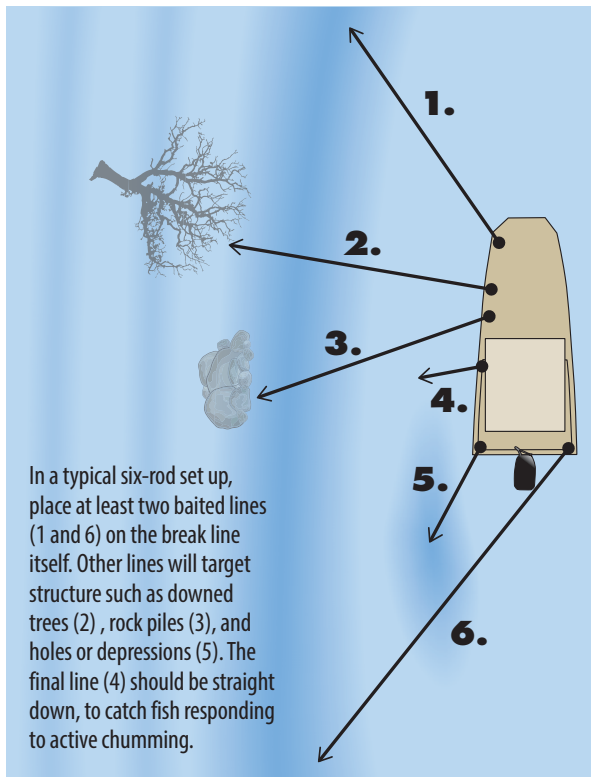
One other factor that Simpson doesn't want to leave out is making sure he drops at least one line straight down from the boat.

"When I cut-bait fish, I usually chum the discarded parts over the side," he said.

"There's always that one cat that comes to investigate where the chum is coming from and he usually ends up getting the down rod." ■



Phillip Gentry is a freelance outdoor writer and photographer who says that if it swims, walks, hops, flies or crawls he's usually not too far behind.



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CANE CUTTERS & HILLBILLIES

By Bobby Cleveland

February is rabbit-hunting time in Mississippi. Be ready to hit the swamps and briars for swamp rabbits and cottontails.

"Yeah, they ran through the briars and they ran through the brambles, and they ran through the bushes where a rabbit couldn't go."

One would surmise that Jimmy Driftwood, who penned those lines in his song, *Battle of New Orleans* — which singer Johnny Horton took to No. 1 on Billboard charts in 1959 — was a hunter.

Anybody who has ever hunted rabbits knows the kind of stuff the rascally animals will hit to escape a pack of beagles, and the hardest-working hunters have probably hummed that tune as they've pushed through dense cover to work their hounds.

"If you haven't come back to the truck bloody from the briars, and soaking wet from the swamp, then you haven't really been rabbit hunting," said Tony Holeman, an avid sportsman from Flowood. "Those critters will lead you into hell and back."

February is the peak time for rabbit-hunting throughout most of Mississippi, mainly because it comes after the close of deer season in all but the southeast corner of the state. The season opens in mid-October and always ends on Feb. 28.



True rabbit hunters, the drivers, get down and dirty with the beagles, and they bear the scars to prove it.

It also coincides with the region's coldest weather, which is perfect for the dogs. Warmer months will drain the endurance of beagles, and the warmer, dryer ground won't hold scent as well as damp, cold terrain.

"Good thing that it's cold, too, because a hunter can wear more layers for protection from the thorns and the briars," Holeman said. "You can tell the real rabbit hunters on a hunt; they're the ones wearing Carhartts over a few layers. And, they usually won't be wearing a vest (which means they get stuck carrying rabbits)."

"They do the hard work, getting in the thick of it with the dogs and helping jump rabbits that the dogs can then run out of the thick stuff to where the shooters are standing in the open, leaning against the golf cart or ATV they rode in on."

The shooters are the ones wearing vests. "Yeah, let them carry the load, at least as far as their rides," said Holeman, who relishes his role as briar-buster or marsh-wader. He can be both because Mississippi has two different species of rabbits, and each has its preferred habitat.

There's the bigger swamp rabbit, a.k.a. canecutter, which loves water and usually includes it in its escape plan.

The other is the smaller cottontail, a.k.a. hillbilly — or bunny rabbit — which loves the thick, gnarly cover.

Both are fun to hunt, tasty to eat, and tough to chase.

HABITAT: PICK YOUR POISON UP NEXT ➤





HABITAT: PICK YOUR POISON

Which rabbit is easiest to hunt, the swampers or the hillbillies? “I really don’t have a preference, but I bet you anything the dogs do,” Holeman said. “Swampers will take them on bigger chases, for miles sometimes it seems, but that is easier on a dog than chasing a hillbilly through the briars. That can tear up a dog, and a lot of time they can get hung up in the stuff.”

There are two key differences in the two species: size and habitat preference.

“They are a lot alike outside of that,” Holeman said. “They way they run depends on the habitat. Swamp rabbits will hit water and use it and take off in more of a long haul. Hillbillies will do more stuff with briars, zig-zagging and stuff, using what they have so they don’t have to go on long runs.

“Both have their up and down sides, and both can plum tucker you out.”

Because of the different habitats they prefer, it is rare that hunters get both on the same hunt.

“There are some hunts where there are overlaps, but most days we don’t see many swamp rabbits and hillbilly rabbits in the same game bag,” said hunter Phillip Long of Meridian. “A good swamper race can last a long, long time, with the dogs running slap out of hearing range. We like them because we usually find more concentrations of them than we do the hillbillies.

“We run a lot of hillbillies just because there are a lot of them around, but you put a pack of good dogs in a creek or a river bottom with a few deer-green food plots around, and swampers will be thick. We find a lot of concentrations of hillbillies in the

cypress brake or a creek or ditch bank on the edge of the field, you’re going to chase swampers.

“If the turn rows are mostly dry, you’re going to find bunnies. Or, if you are hunting old catfish ponds that have been drained and converted back to natural cover, that’s where you’ll find a lot of hillbillies. That’s some of the toughest hunting, but also some of the best.”

Holeman also likes to hunt swampy areas, like islands around Barnett Reservoir near Jackson.

“We found out how good those islands can be while duck hunting one day,” he said. “We didn’t do so good with ducks



Delta in turnrows or on old overgrown levees. We once killed 17 hillbillies in 30 minutes on a 250-yard railroad bed levee running through a big cotton field.”

Hallman loves to hunt in the Mississippi Delta, and he has a choice of species there.

“Rabbits depend on fresh, tender, green growth, and there’s a lot of that in the Delta fields,” he said. “But it’s what the terrain is around those fields that dictates the species. If there is a

that day, but we kept seeing rabbit pellets on every log and stump, so I knew there had to be a lot of them around. We went home and got the beagles and went back and killed a lot of swamp rabbits that afternoon.

“They love marshy areas, and they know how to use it. They can run on top of marsh, while dogs and hunters can get bogged down in it. They feel safe from predators like coyotes and bobcats there.”

GOING FULL CIRCLE, OR NOT

Most hare hunters believe rabbits will always circle back to where they were jumped, and they use that to decide where they need to stand to get a shot.

“One of my favorite things about going rabbit hunting with a lot of novice hunters is watching them scramble to go where the dogs are going,” said hunter Jimmy Turner of Vicksburg. “They think they can get ahead of the chase and cut the rabbit off just by listening to the dogs. What they don’t know is that the rabbit is long gone by then.

“I just ease over to where the rabbit was first jumped and wait. I know that there’s a darned good chance, like 75 or 80 percent, that the rabbit is going to circle back. Swamp rabbits, especially, will come back. They may take the dogs clear out of hearing range, but sooner or later you’ll hear the barking coming back. When it sounds like the dogs are about 200 or 250 yards away coming back, you best be ready and have your gun up. That rabbit is going to be way ahead.”

Holeman doesn’t always buy into that strategy.

“I don’t know about that circling stuff,” he said. “Sure, I’ve seen a lot of rabbits circle back, but that’s usually when they don’t have options of escaping without abandoning cover. I’ve had swamp rabbits run a straight line away on a creek bank and never stop. We have to run to cut the dogs off before they cross the property line or a highway.”

One of the best hunts I’ve ever experienced was in the Delta along an old, dry levee adjacent to a cotton field.

The bank of the levee was dense with briars, brambles and hillbilly rabbits. If the dogs were on their trail and they felt cornered by hunters in front of them, they’d make a sprint — often finding faster gears because of close misses from shotgun blasts — into the cotton stubble before circling back to the levee.

I found a secret to hitting them in the cotton. I’d shoot ahead of them to blow a hole in the stubble and then shoot a second time in the same place. It worked!

“You do see hillbillies do more circling because they like to stay tight in that thick cover,” Holeman said. “A swamper, heck, he’s liable to run clear out of the county on you. He may circle back, but it could be a day or two.”

‘RABBITAT’: CRP BOOM PASSED UP NEXT ➤

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 Internationally 2008,
 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013,
 2014, 2015, 2016



Rabbit numbers really jumped in the 1980s and 1990s when their preferred habitat was on the increase across Mississippi.

'RABBITAT': CRP BOOM PASSED

Rabbit numbers have seen a steady decline over the past decade, and that reduction is easily explained. It's due to the loss of habitat, which biologists, like Rick Hamrick, small-game coordinator for the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, call "rabbitat."

Rabbit numbers increased in the 80s and 90s when the Conservation Reserve and Wetland Reserve Programs saw an increase in rabbitat.

"Even before CRP and WRP, agricultural land was being reforested because landowners were looking for an alternative to farming for land use," Hamrick said. "During the first five or 10 years after trees were planted, those sites provided ideal rabbit cover, as they were essentially fallow or old field habitat. That boom has largely subsided as many of those forest plantings have grown up to the point of shading out grasses and broad-leaf plants in the ground layer."

The loss of that habitat, however, has led to a movement to develop more by other means. That boom in the 80s and 90s renewed interest in rabbit hunting, and more hunters are working hard to create more places to hunt.

"We often have the flexibility to enhance CRP fields for wildlife habitat, and often those non-native grass fields can be shifted to a more wildlife-friendly, native plant community," Hamrick said. "However, county USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) personnel need to be involved before making changes to existing CRP plans. Contact a wildlife biologist for more information on managing rabbit habitat."

In southeast Mississippi, Hurricane Katrina provided a boost to rabbit numbers over the past decade. The storm decimated a lot of forestlands, produced a lot of brush piles in which rabbits hide, and opened up the forest canopy to produce more dense undergrowth for even more rabbitat.

"But that impact has come and gone," said hunter Jimmy Thomas of Hattiesburg. "We got about five or six good years beginning in 2006, the year after Katrina, when the rabbits exploded, and we had such great hunting that we saw a rebirth in the sport and in big packs of beagles."

"We still have some good territory to hunt on public lands, like Leaf River and Pascagoula Wildlife Management Areas, and there is still some good, young pine habitat on private land. The downside to the deer season being open through Feb. 15 is we just don't get to hunt rabbits as often as we'd like."

BOTH ARE GOOD TO EAT

Wild rabbits are wonderful table fare, said Dr. Henry Jones of Kosciusko, a longtime rabbit hunter and veterinarian.

"Probably would still enjoy hunting them if they weren't, because I love running my dogs and hearing the chase, but it's a bonus that they are so good to eat," said Jones, who once produced a series of rabbit-hunting videos that he made by carrying a camera more than he did a gun.

His wife, Terry Jones, followed his lead and published a cookbook with rabbit recipes: *After the Rabbit Hunt*.

"There are so many great ways to eat rabbits," Terry Jones



said about the book, published in the mid-1990s, "that I felt I could do a book. It includes our favorite, Rabbit Nuggets, which we like to serve with biscuits for breakfast, and even Hasenpfeffer, a German dish."

Rabbit and dumplings are a favorite in many Mississippi households.

"I guess I prefer the swamp rabbit when it comes to eating," Holeman said. "No. 1, they're so much bigger that you get as much meat from one big swamper than you do two or three hillbillies.

No. 2, they're such a bigger target that hunters have a better chance of hitting them. No. 3, they run in the open more than hillbillies, so it's more likely they will present a good shot."

Big swamp rabbits can be tough, and are used most frequently in recipes that include parboiling to tenderize the meat.

"When you slow-cook them down, it allows you to pull the meat from the bone and to help find all the shot pellets and bone fragments," Holeman said. "My favorite way to cook them is to put that pulled meat back in a crockpot with a good barbecue sauce and slow-cook it on low to infuse the sauce in the meat. Makes great pulled rabbit sandwiches." ■



Pine plantations that are young enough that they don't have a canopy that will inhibit thick undergrowth will hold rabbits.



Bobby Cleveland has covered sports in Mississippi for over 40 years. A native of Hattiesburg and graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi, Cleveland lives on Ross Barnett Reservoir near Jackson with his wife Pam.

RABBIT SAUCE PIQUANT
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WRITER'S CHOICE: RABBIT SAUCE PIQUANT

According to the late, great Cajun chef, Paul Prudhomme, "piquant to a Cajun means, literally, so hot it hurts like a sticker in your tongue."

This recipe for rabbit sauce piquant is based on a Prudhomme recipe, but with a few changes made to accommodate wild rabbits instead of the more-tender domestic rabbits. It is a three-step recipe that includes making stock and tenderizing the rabbits, making a roux and then combining the two to simmer into a final, hot-as-fire dish.

In a big pot, cover rabbits and vegetables with water and bring to a boil. After five minutes, reduce heat to low and simmer no less than 3 hours. Strain off and reserve stock, toss vegetables and, once cooled, carefully de-bone the rabbit meat,

making sure to remove all shot pellets, and then set aside. The size of the pieces left is moot, since it will fall apart while cooking.

In a Dutch oven, add oil and flour over medium-high heat and make a roux. Lower heat and slowly cook until a light-brown roux about the color of peanut butter is achieved. Remove from heat and immediately stir in half the onion, bell pepper and celery to stop the roux from cooking. Return to medium heat and add remaining onion, bell pepper and celery, plus the jalapeno, garlic and half the seasoning mix and cook until onions are translucent. Add tomato paste and stir until dissolved. Scrape the bottom during cooking to prevent sticking but keeping anything that sticks in the pot. Add the tomatoes and cook a few more minutes. Add the hot sauce.

RABBIT SAUCE PIQUANT STOCK

3 swamp or 5 hillbilly rabbits, or a mixture of both, cut into quarters and one loin piece

1 gallon of water

Trimings from celery, onions, carrots, garlic

3 bay leaves

Seasonings, mixed in advance

2 tbsp salt

1 tbsp dry mustard

1 tbsp sweet paprika

1 tbsp black pepper

1 tbsp cayenne pepper

1 tbsp white pepper

2 tbsp garlic powder

1 tsp dried thyme

Roux/vegetables

1½ cup canola oil

2 cups flour

3 cups diced onion

2 cups diced bell pepper

2 cups chopped celery

½ cup chopped minced fresh (not pickled) jalapeno, seeds removed

4 cups diced, peeled tomatoes (if using canned, drain and use no-salt added)

1 tbsp or more minced garlic

1 small can, tomato paste

2 tbsp hot sauce (Louisiana preferred)

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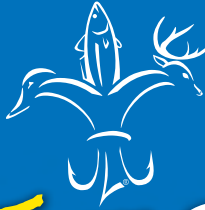
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MAKING THE SAUCE PIQUANT

Bring half of the stock to boil in a large gumbo pot and start adding the roux/vegetable mix one big spoonful at a time, stirring to dissolve, until all is mixed. Add rabbit and remaining seasoning mix. Reduce heat to medium, stir frequently and make sure nothing is sticking. As the roux and rabbit thicken the stock, add remaining stock a little at a time until desired thickness is reached. Reduce heat to low and let simmer at least an hour, stirring occasionally and adding more stock if needed. Do not be alarmed as rabbit begins to fall apart. That is the goal. Taste for seasoning and adjust if needed.

Serve in bowls, over rice, with French bread for dipping. ■

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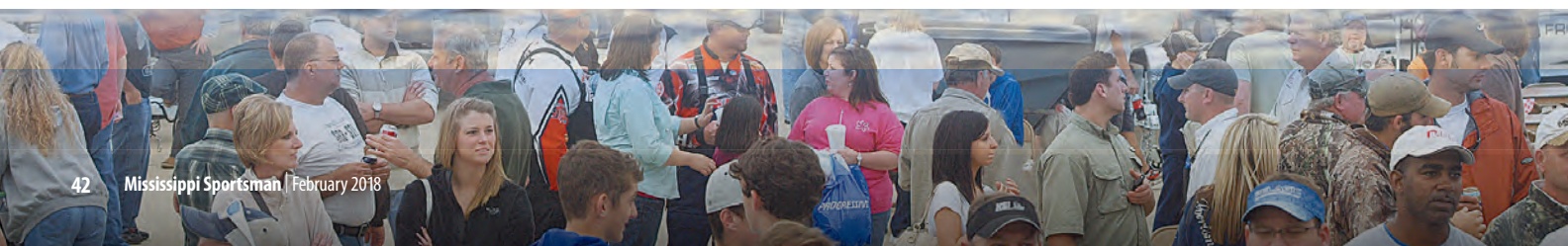
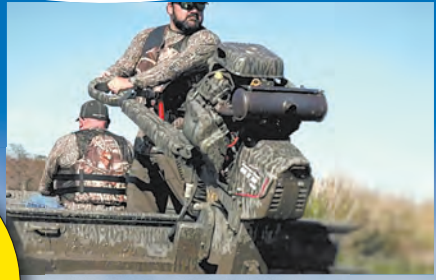


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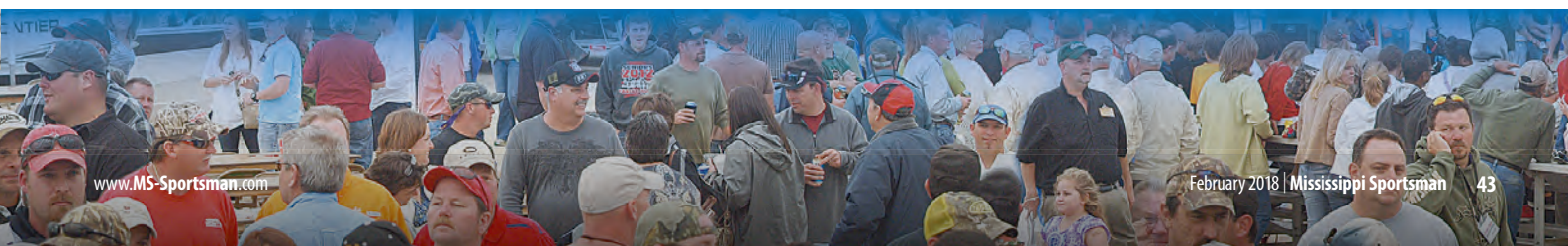


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SLAY SLABS NOW!

Don't wait for the spawn to target Mississippi's crappie. February marks the beginning of great prespawn fishing.

By Mike O. Giles

Scott Vance dropped a few jigs into the water, but before he could get all his poles out, the action began.
Wham!

A crappie slammed a jig and almost jerked the pole out of the rod holder. Vance set the hook and quickly landed his first crappie.

The bite was on, despite frigid temperatures and cold water that greeted him last February on a trip to Okatibbee Lake. Although the spawn was still a ways off, crappie were getting ready, staging in their traditional, prespawn areas, where Vance, who is from Collinsville, was ready for them with his jigs, minnows and spider-rig setup.

"The males go shallow first and prepare the spawning sites, and a lot of the fishermen will be there with them catching the smaller males," Vance said. "But the bigger females are staging at the nearest deep water, and that could be along a creek channel or ditch running through a shallow spawning flat. I prefer fishing deeper water; that's where I'll be because it's easier for me to catch them with my setup and GPS system."

While most folks are waiting for warmer weather, Vance will enjoy some of the hottest action of the year on flood-control lakes like Okatibbee, Grenada and Enid.

"The big females will come in and lay their eggs and move out pretty fast," Vance said. "They'll leave their eggs in there for the males to guard and move back out to their staging area. While most of the people are catching the smaller males — and an occasional female — I'll be catching the big sows before, during and after the spawn in the 8-foot range."

Although Vance has learned the traditional staging areas through years of experience and trial and error, he also utilizes his Hummingbird Helix 7 to stay on the hot spots and troll through the prime spots of each area.

"I like to stay on the edge of the ditches and troll from stump to stump, just hitting the hot spots," Vance said. "I usually catch them around the stumps, and it doesn't take long to catch a limit when the weather is right and they're biting. Plus, I usually have them all to myself."

DON'T FORGET THE MINNOWS ➤



Mitch Glenn's Pico Ringed Pointer tale grub on a Scott Vance custom-painted jighead with red sickle hook and a Berkley Crappie Nibble is a deadly prespawn combination on crappie.

TOP PRESPAWN LURE PICKS

We polled several successful crappie fishermen, and these products were among their recommendations for cold-water crappie in the prespawn mode:

- Pico Scent Ring Pointer;
- Pico Scent Ring Tube;
- Moe's Slab Sauce;
- Bass Pro Crappie Ringers;
- Scott Vance Custom painted jigs;
- Crappie Nibbles;
- Mr. Crappie Slab Daddy;
- Mr. Crappie Slab Daddy Supper Rig.



DON'T FORGET THE MINNOWS

While many people like to use jigs to keep their hands dry during prespawn action, Vance said minnows have their advantages; mainly, they catch crappie year-round.

"Most of us diehard crappie anglers don't care what we catch the fish on, just as long as we get some action and catch a few," Vance said. "When the fish are hitting light or they're finicky because of the weather or fluctuating water levels, they'll usually hit a minnow dangled in front of them."

"At Grenada, Enid, Sardis and Lake Washington, I'll use a minnow because the fish are larger, and we want a bigger profile to entice those big slabs into biting. They'll power-troll on those lakes with the larger minnows on double-minnow rigs with 2- or 3-ounce weights to keep the minnows down there while they're constantly moving. If you put that minnow right on them, it's hard for them to turn down."

While 2-pound crappie are rare in most places, it's not uncommon for anglers to catch 3-pound crappie from one of the Big 4 lakes. When you're after big fish, big minnows are the order of the day.

Whether you prefer jigs, spinners, double-minnow rigs or minnows fished under corks, there's sure to be a few prespawn crappie just ready to sample your special offering. Just make sure you bring along plenty of stout line, sharp hooks and jigs, or you

just might run out of lures or bait before filling your limit.

Mitch Glenn, a lure designer and former tournament competitor, has been designing and building crappie and bass lures since his teen years in Arkansas. Suffice it to say, he knows a few things about catching prespawn crappie in mid- to late February.

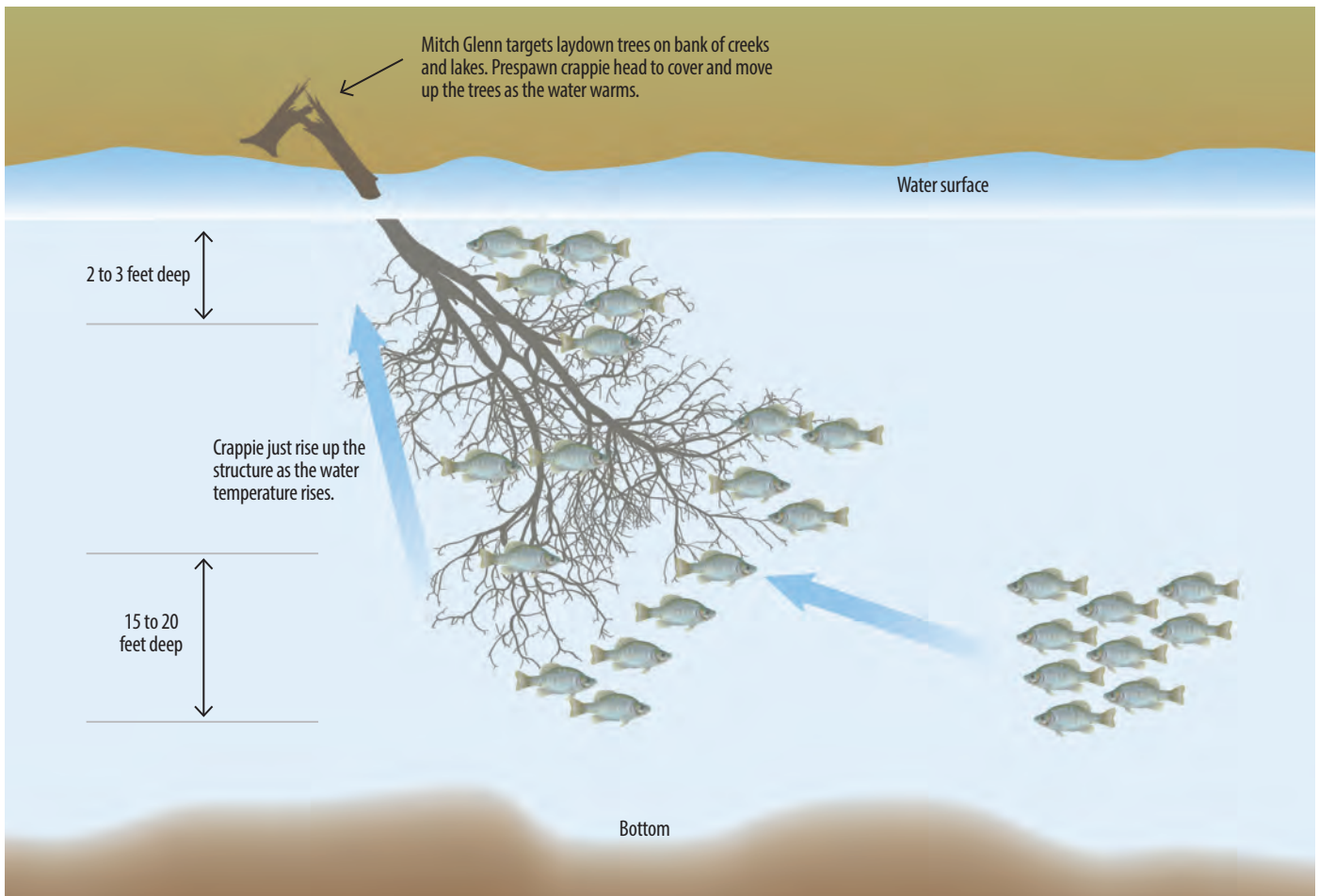
"The cycle for prespawn crappie usually begins in mid-February," Glenn said. "The first time the sun shines and the wind is not blowing, we'll find a good laydown or wood structure, because the crappie are going to move up to it."

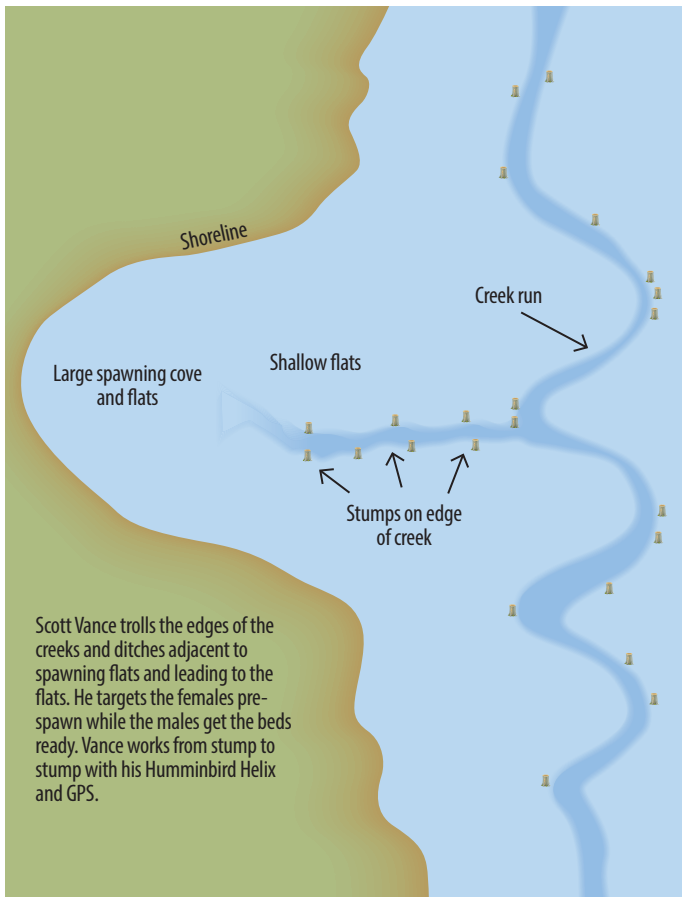
"If you get out there at the right time of day, the fish will come to the structure, and they may move from deep to shallow over the course of the day, depending upon how the temperature and weather is."

Glenn works the trees and structure back and forth with his jigs, and it usually doesn't take long to catch a limit. When he locates lay-down trees that hold fish, they may be caught at the deepest part of the tree early in the day and caught near the surface later in the day if the water warms significantly.

And remember, if you wait until you hear the fish are biting before you go, you've probably missed out on the best crappie angling of the year.

SCENTED NIBBLES, SLAB SAUCE





Scott Vance trolls the edges of the creeks and ditches adjacent to spawning flats and leading to the flats. He targets the females pre-spawn while the males get the beds ready. Vance works from stump to stump with his Humminbird Helix and GPS.



Mitch Glenn takes down pre-spawn crappie usually with his own lure design, a Pico Scent Ring Pointer jig, laced with Moe's Slab Sauce.



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SLAY SLABS NOW!



Writer Mike Giles caught prespawn crappie last February on shallow grass at Okatibbee Lake, a tactic most fishermen overlook that early in the year.

SCENTED NIBBLES, SLAB SAUCE

There will be days when fish need a little extra tempting, especially on a jig.

“Sometimes, the fish need a little added enticement during the prespawn; I’ll tip my jigs with Crappie Nibbles or Ed Moes’ Slab Sauce,” Vance said. “Moes is the founder of Crappie.com, which has 100,000 members, and his nickname is Slab.”

“He’s an avid crappie fisherman who came up with a better product to catch more fish. And you’ll catch more fish in cold weather by spraying some Slab Sauce on your crappie jigs. Slab Sauce smells just like a fish because it actually is made from fish.”

Slab Sauce is thicker than some of the traditional sprays used in bass fishing, and that oily thickness keeps it on the lure longer and the crappie really latch on to it, he said.

“I’ve used the Crappie Nibbles for a long time, and they really work well, but they’re usually done after one bite,” Vance said. “With the new Slab Sauce, the scent stays on there longer, and you just have to freshen it up every once in a while and it keeps on working.”

It was Glenn’s love for crappie fishing and introduction to Slab Sauce that led him to design a couple of baits for Pico Lures, specifically to use with the scent.

While fish may bite in cold water, they often spit the lure out before an angler can react; the Slab Sauce makes them hold on just long enough for a fisherman to feel them and set the hook.

“We came up with a couple of solid-body tube and pointer tail,



shad-type baits lined with little rings designed to hold the slab sauce,” Glenn said. “The more surface area that’s on a lure, the longer the sauce is going to stay on them, and the more fish you may catch as a result.”

Glenn has been working on the new lures for about six months, and they’re going on the market in time for the spring crappie season after extensive field-testing. The jigs catch crappie, and when sprayed with the Slab Sauce they’re tough in cold water too.

“Our top Mississippi colors are orange and chartreuse or black and chartreuse,” Glenn said. “On sunny days or in clear water, they like the lighter colors like clear pinks and pearl colors.” ■

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PRESPAWN CRAPPIE IN THE GRASS

I grew up fishing for bass and crappie year-round and have learned a few things about finding and catching prespawn crappie.

During high-water years, when lake levels rise into the grass and brush, you can also find prespawn crappie in the grass. While a lot of anglers, including Scott Vance, were catching prespawn Okatibbee Lake crappie along the ditches and channels near shallow flats this past February, we were catching prespawn crappie in the grass. Few anglers realized fish had already moved up.

We used 11-foot, graphite jig poles with black/chartreuse, or black/hot pink jigs, tipped with Berkley Crappie Nibbles.

The water was warming, but the air was very cold, and the crappie were biting but not chasing. The key to catching crappie in the grass is to ease the jig down into or right beside the grass stalks and let it sit a second. If you don't get bit, jig it up and down slowly a second and then move to the next patch of grass. Crappie usually bite when you pump it and let it fall.

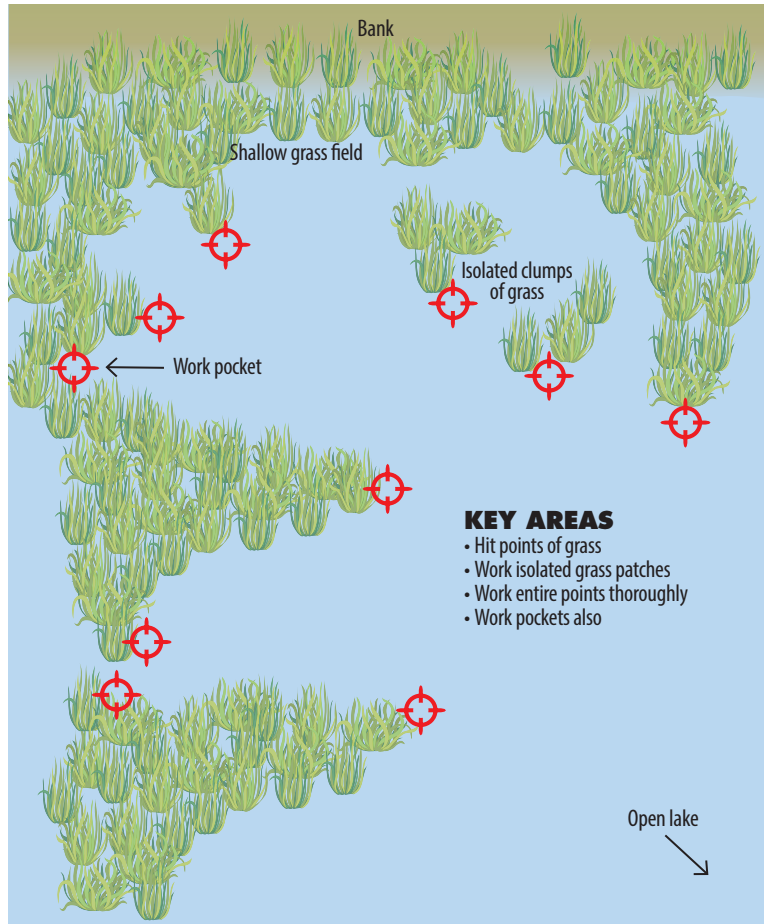
If you'll drop that jig beside each clump of grass, you'll get a bite if one's there. Cover enough territory and slow down when you get a bite. You'll usually find the crappie ganged up in one small area; you can load the boat.

If the bite is slow, just work the grass thoroughly and work the area back and forth until the bite stops. Often, more crappie will move in, and you can keep catching prespawn slabs.

If they're in the grass, they're usually hungry and will hit anything, though they may be a bit lethargic, even on windy days. Anchor your boat or use a Power Pole to hold it in place and slowly and methodically work each piece of grass. On one February trip to Okatibbee Lake, I caught 27 keepers from one grass patch without ever moving the boat. ■



Mike Giles of Meridian has been hunting and fishing Mississippi since 1965. He is an award-winning wildlife photographer, writer, seminar speaker and guide.



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Courtesy Rick Dillard

THOSE EARLY SPAWNERS



February is beginning of a Mississippi largemouth bass's trip to the spawn and a great time for anglers to target the biggest of the big. Here's how... By David Hawkins

Few things are more frustrating for an angler than seeing a large bass ignore his or her offering, which, well, darn it, becomes a pretty common occurrence in the early weeks of the spawn in Mississippi.

"Despite the cold, bass are still looking for all those things that bass need," said pro angler Shannon Denson of Fannin, "those being comfortable water temperature, ample dissolved oxygen and a good food source."

"This prespawn period sees bass starting to move based on those things that trigger the spawn."

February typically features a marked increase in fish movement and fishing activity. Florida-strain largemouths, especially in the southern half of the Magnolia State, become more active before than their native northern cousins, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

We're talking here about all bass before the true spawning period. There is a myth biologists debunk that Florida-strain bass feed more aggressively during winter than northern black bass.

So what should an angler be looking for as the bass spawn approaches? Let's consider all the factors that control bass

behavior this time of year.

"All bass like to spawn on a flat surface, the flatter the better," Denson said. "It's in the deep water near these sometimes generations-old bedding areas that the

Big bass like a big meal, especially when in cold weather when their metabolism is slower, and they can swallow a plenty big one.



David Hawkins

bass will stage, waiting on just the right conditions to start the spawn. Before the start of spawning activity, bass are cold and sluggish, but they can be caught."

Shad, as always, are the key to bass activity.



Bass and shad have a special relationship in winter. When bass get hungry, they eat shad. To expend the least amount of energy necessary, bass may pick on injured or dying shad. With a gullet full, they may not feed again for up to two weeks.

The remainder of the time, they hang motionless like a cluster of couch-potato humans watching back-to-back bowl games. The good news for anglers is that not every bass eats at the same time; some are always ready for a snack.

“The bass, being cold-blooded creatures, are the same temperature as the water, and cold water slows a bass’s metabolism,” said Tom Holman, a fisheries biologist for the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks. “Studies have shown a bass may require several days for a meal, such as a shad, to digest.

“Water temperature will pretty much be the same from top to bottom in the winter. Several days of warm weather will heat the surface, and a wind might pile it up, so to speak, but as soon as conditions calm, the water evens out.”

Anglers can judge the progression of the spawn by the bass they are catching. If only buck bass are being caught shallow, while fanning out nesting areas, then it’s pre-spawn time.

The larger, egg-heavy females are going to be in deeper water near the ledges where the males are building the nursery. Both will be feeding, but the males are particularly vulnerable, hitting almost anything they see cruising

TECHNIQUES AND PRESENTATION ARE CRITICAL

Getting a lure to the depth at which bass are holding and keeping it in the strike zone are two requirements a fisherman must satisfy to entice a strike. How neat it would be to have a lure with a built-in transponder that would transmit its exact depth and location in relation to the bass. Such baits doesn’t exist, but finding structure or drop-offs on the sonar and the ability to feel them with a rod and line will suffice.

Finding the proper depth where fish are holding necessitates an accurate sonar unit. Pre-spawn, staging females are usually suspended in the water column.

Veteran angler Donnie Stuart of Pelahatchie has solved the problem with a degree of satisfaction with the results.

“I have never had a good feel for just how deep my baits were, or if I was fishing at the right depth,” Stuart said. “So I tied a

bead-stop at the depth I see fish holding and use a slip cork to keep the bait where I want it to suspend. Then I use a spoon with a trailer or plastic bait such as a Shimmy Shad.”

Stuart uses the plastic on a 1/8-ounce weighted hook so it will sink slowly. Instead of jerking the bait, he raises the rod tip to raise the bait under the cork. It slowly sinks, mimicking the actions of a dying shad. Most strikes come when the bait starts to fall. By keeping the bait suspended under the cork, Stuart can fish it as slowly as he likes.

“When using the jig with the trailer, sort of a traditional jig-and-pig, I stick to crawfish colors with blue accents,” Stuart said. “This works well where structure allows the bait to crawl on the bottom. I squirt a little fish attractant to get the bass to hold the bait a little longer. It has been my experience that bass will take the bait, but will not run with it. Seeing a slight twitch in the line or feeling the resistance is sometimes the only way I know I have a fish.” ■



If you’ve located bass holding on or near the bottom, it’s hard to beat a chunky jig-and-pig in February.

David Hawkins

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“The bass, being cold-blooded creatures, are the same temperature as the water, and cold water slows a bass’s metabolism.”

in the shallows. It is totally different than when both males and females are on the beds, when fish are more finicky and often grab the intruder with the intention of taking it away from the nest, not eating it.

Males and females will do this as the spawn progresses.

The females move up and lay their eggs while the male waits nearby, guarding the nest from intruders. As the water begins to warm, frogs, salamanders, other fish and birds will come to prey on the eggs in the nest. With the eggs deposited, the males waste little time in moving in to spread their sperm, thus clouding the water. The females will almost immediately exit, leaving parental duties to the male, which will guard the nest and eggs, and then the hatched fry.

Fish can be caught throughout the process. ■



David Hawkins is a freelance writer living in Forest, Miss. He can be reached at hawkins2209@att.net.

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MISSISSIPPI'S PRESPAWN HOT SPOTS

The Magnolia State has hundreds of bodies of water where bass can be caught, but some are simply better than others at different times of the year and bass cycles.

For instance, not every lake is stocked with Florida-strain bass, and knowing which members of the largemouth family are present is important. Water clarity is also important, especially for sight-fishing bedding bass.

A good place to start is the MDWFP's system of state lakes, many of which have been renovated, restocked and rejuvenated. Stocked primarily with Florida-strain bass, years 3 through 12 are the best for targeting these fast-growing fish. They are easy to catch in years 3 through 5, since they are naïve. It's in the next handful of years when they are at trophy stage and still a little ignorant.

A lot of factors dictate a lake's productivity during the pre-spawn, when the vast majority of the biggest fish are caught. After research, here is *Mississippi Sportsman's* list of the best lakes for prespawn bass.

• **Neshoba County Lake** near Philadelphia was restocked more than 10 years ago, and a lake record was set in February 2017 with a 14.3-pound female. According to lake manager Chuck Hazlewood, the bass have plenty of cover, and bass stocked in 2005 should have reached peak maturity. With back-to-back lake records set last year there is no reason to believe another record couldn't be set in 2018.

• **Lake Jeff Davis**, restocked in 2011, can be added to the list. Just six years in, the lake-record bass, 12.6 pounds, was caught in March 2017.

"Jeff Davis is approaching its peak and I believe there are bigger fish there," said Jerry Brown, a fisheries biologist for the MDWFP.

According to Larry Bull, assistant chief of fisheries for MDWFP, these lakes should produce

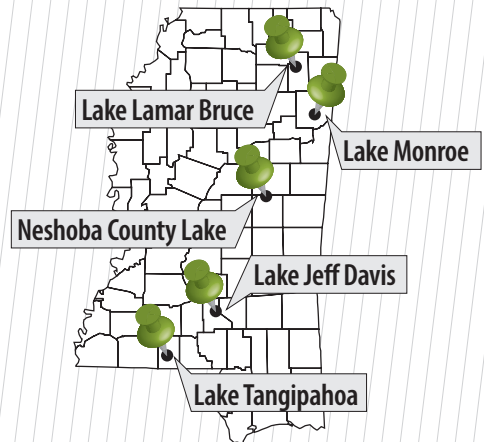
Wes Vowell broke the Neshoba County Lake record with this 14.3-pound sow caught in February 2017.



Courtesy Chuck Hazlewood

fish heavier than 10 pounds in the near future:

- **Lake Tangipahoa** at Percy Quinn State Park was stocked with Florida bass in 2014. The biggest bass caught since it was reopened is 10.5 pounds.
- Stocked in 2013, **Lake Lamar Bruce** boasts a lake record of 9.2 pounds caught in July 2017. Historically known as a bream fishing paradise, Lamar Bruce could be a sleeper when it comes to big bass.
- * **Lake Monroe** was stocked with Florida bass in 2015, and reopened to fishing in 2017. Go there for numbers now, but look for it to become a trophy-bass location with fish in excess of 10 pounds in a few years. ■



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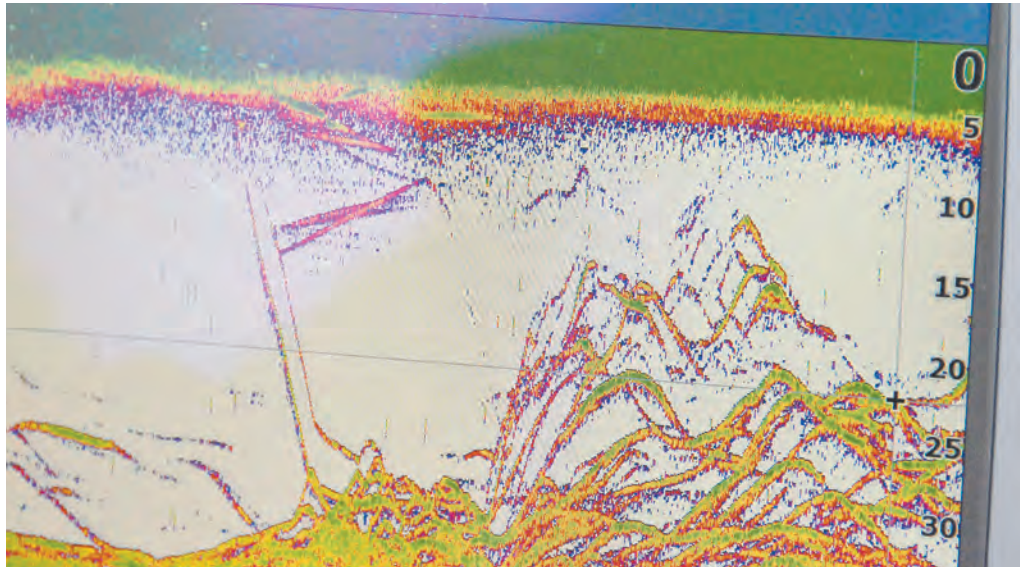
Spike those early spawners



GET THE RIGHT GEAR

For prespawn bass, angler Donnie Stuart of Pelahatchie favors 17-pound braided line with a fluorocarbon leader as long as the rod he is using when not using a slip-cork. For the rod with the slip cork he uses a 10- to 12-pound monofilament.

He prefers a medium-heavy action rod, at the very least, to



Phillip Gentry

Having a quality depth finder on your bass boat and knowing how to use it to locate baitfish and bass is a key to better prespawn fishing.

horse bass out of structure.

A quality fish finder becomes an important tool for the modern angler. A side-imaging mode is all the better. Learning to identify a deep-water shad ball is the important first step in finding nearby bass.

"The first step may sound too simple," bass pro Shannon Denson of Fannin said. "Look in those places where you have found fish before. If you are new to a lake, then look off points, underwater humps and structure adjacent to deeper water. A dense school of shad will show up as a large, suspended spot on most depth finders. Better models will add more separation to the shad."

"Let me say this; not every bass will be near a shad ball. Drop-offs where there is structure are also going to hold bass in winter. Look at every location where there is a change in depth, such as creek channels. And, shad are not the only food source. Bass will also target bream and crappie. The point is, bass don't hibernate in winter, they just slow down." ■

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Baits like hard- or soft-plastic jerkbaits or swimbaits can be fished for suspended bass early in the prespawn cycle.

THROW WHAT **BASS WANT**

According to Tom Holman, a biologist with the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, gizzard shad tolerate cooler water better than threadfin shad. When shad die, they sink to the bottom, which is why catfish caught in winter are often gorged with threadfin picked up off the bottom.

What does this mean for bass fishermen? Holman believes lures made to look or act like wounded or dying shad may work best for lethargic winter bass.

High on the list of Fannin bass pro Shannon Denson's list of winter go-to baits are suspending jerkbaits, such as a Smithwick Super Rouge. Allowing the bait time to suspend, Denson works the rod tip up and down to make the bait swims toward the surface for a foot or so, then fall and suspend again. The motion mimics that of an injured or dying minnow.

"There are quite a few baits that suspend now," Denson said. "I don't think one is really better than another, as much as presentation is a key for success. Bomber, Bandit and others have made divers that have limited depth, but if they dive deep enough to reach the suspended fish, then they can be successful."

Once the sows began moving to the bedding areas, baits need to change to those that mimic threats to the nest and the eggs. Lizards or salamanders pulled through the bed will spark an angry reaction by the attending bass.

Consider that unique patterns exist on some lakes, and Ross Barnett Reservoir and the prespawn is a perfect example. If you don't know how to swim a lizard through pad stems and other vegetation, you might as well stay home. It will work



like crazy on buck bass in February and early March, then be extremely deadly when the big females move in to find a mating partner.

A slow, quiet approach is necessary in shallow water, so carry a push pole and don't be heavy footed on the trolling motor. ■

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Great with grubs

Grubs aren't flashy, and they're not in vogue right now. But they downright catch bass, and this month is prime time for the versatile lures.

By David A. Brown

David A. Brown

They're kind of like the shortstop of your tackle box, only without all the glamor and star power. Indeed, grubs are a multi-talented category of soft plastics whose

lack of fanfare starkly contrasts their versatility.

In terms of contemporary bait designs, grubs might be somewhat of an old-school category, but the lures have an enduring and endearing appeal that merits space in every tackle bag.

Bass pro Andrew Upshaw, who's tallied nine top-10 finishes including a College Fishing Series win, devotes a lot of his casts to the Gene Larew Rally Grub, a 3½-inch bait introduced at ICAST 2014.

And while Upshaw believes in the grub's potential across the calendar, he finds these baits excel in the colder months.

"Grubs are typically wintertime lures for most anglers," Upshaw said. "Some guys take them out after January, others leave them in the boat all year. I think the Rally Grub is a bait that could stay in a fisherman's boat all year, just because of the versatility of the lure.

"Whether you are fishing shallow in the winter or deep, the Rally Grub has a use in your boat."

There's a couple of key reasons for this. First, your smaller, subtle profiles often tempt picky bass when they've seen too many reaction baits, and larger-profile jigs and Texas rigs.

Upshaw noted that winter months bring the grub front and center, because bass metabolism slows and fish rarely feel like chasing a fleet-footed lure or expending the energy to capture what looks like a big, feisty meal.

This is the time when those modest meals tend to get more attention.

Secondly, even when the fish are snapping — say, a warming trend or a during winter rain — downsizing is often the key to sneaking a bait into the strike

zone without the fish scattering, as they often do when plunked with something that exceeds their tolerance.

By definition, a grub's key characteristic is a short, usually round body resembling an insect larvae. Body design can be smooth, segmented or ribbed (partially or fully), while some makers dress up the presentation with fringed heads like the Outcast Spider Grub or Yamamoto Hula Grub.

On the back end, the traditional look includes a single oversized sickle or hook-shaped tail that swims with a bold display. Examples include Kalin's Magombo Grub, Z-Man's Grubz and Chompers Single Tail Grub.

Twin tails like Zoom's Fat Albert and



"I feel (grubs) have been overlooked due to the huge push of swimbaits," Upshaw said. "However, many pros all over the country still rely heavily on grubs in certain situations."

Greg Hackney, a past BASS Angler of the Year, agrees. He's a big fan of the Strike King Rage Twin Tail Menace, a 4-inch grub-style bait that sports two, broad, beveled tails that move lots of water.

The bait is packaged with the tail halves attached so anglers have options for a single or double tail look.

"This is a bait that I can use for several different scenarios, from flipping to swimming presentations," Hackney said.

Grub uses vary from star-of-the-show,

BELOW: FLW Tour pro Andrew Upshaw knows how to tempt grass bass by swimming a grub. **INSET:** Grub-style bodies like the YUM Warning Shot make good drop-shot baits.

Photos by David A. Brown

Berkley's Powerbait Double Tail Grub increase action, while diversity increases with creature bait styles and slug bodies like the Arkie Salty Crawlin Grub and the Evolve RX Vibra Grub, respectively.

Upshaw said he favors the Rally Grub's tail design because the flat knob at the end creates more drag that accentuates the swimming action. That's an important feature, he said, given the emphasis that today's anglers place on swimming action.

to backup performer.

"My overall favorite time of year to fish a grub-style bait is in the winter to pre-spawn time period," Upshaw said. "This is when I fish the grub on a scrounger or jighead the most.

"I cast it out, let it go to the bottom and slowly reel the grub back to the boat; this will allow you to keep it in the strike zone longer."

>



David A. Brown

A gang of grubs

Discussions of grubs cannot exclude their group presentation on the umbrella rig. Although banned in Bassmaster Elite and FLW Tour competition, the multi-armed “egg beaters” remain a vital tool for bass anglers from fall through early spring.

Pro angler Andrew Upshaw can’t use the rig in his national-level competition, but it still has its place in many local and regional trails he fishes. Notably, the bait selection for these metal masses isn’t always what you hear it is.

“I remember when the umbrella rig became a staple in fishermen’s arsenals; many fishermen resorted to throwing swimbaits on their rigs,” Upshaw said. “However, a lot of the most-successful anglers used grubs.

ABOVE: Swimming a Gene Larew Rally Grub on a ball-head jig is a good bet for tempting bass hiding in grass lines. **BELOW:** Curlytail grubs are a popular choice for umbrella rigs like the YUMbrella Flash Mob.

He said the exact presentation of the grub can change. “Some days the fish prefer the shake of a scrounger head, and some days they like the tail swimming through the water,” Upshaw said. “I’ll experiment until I figure out what they like.”

Next on Upshaw’s list of grub tactics is a ChatterBait. The Rally Grub, he said, fits this presentation well because its slim body mimics a shad profile, while the tail pad creates the thumping vibrations that entice fish.

“This is also the time of year I fish the grub on a ChatterBait around shallow water grass,” Upshaw said. “For instance, if I’m fishing a lake that has a lot of shallow-water vegetation during the prespawn, I will use a 3/8-ounce Original ChatterBait in chartreuse and white with a firetiger-colored Rally Grub as a trailer. “That bait combination really stands out.”

Last, Upshaw often addresses ultra-finesse scenarios by using his grub on a drop shot. Here, the bait’s slender profile and active tail offer the kind of presentation bass can’t resist.

“The tail isn’t wide-based like (most) other grubs; its seriously just a little swim tail,” Upshaw said. “It takes very little shake in your rod to give it action, and I think that is crucial for success when drop shotting.”

But there are other applications:



David A. Brown

• **SLOW SWIMMING.** Rigged on a light ball-head jig and pulled along a bank of vegetation or next to a dock, your grub does a great baitfish impersonation. For another ruse, think amphibians.

One of the biggest bass I ever caught waters came on a small, off-brand twin-tail grub barely big enough to accommodate my 3/0 worm hook. Recent rains had turned a storm drain into a mighty current that bounced off a stand of bank grass and reeds with a textbook ambush point in the weed mats on the inside bend.

“Grubs just catch more fish.”

This time of year, umbrella rigs require a slow, plodding retrieve — not necessarily bottom dredging, but down there in the more-stable water.

Once the bass start moving up to their prespawn positions, running the rig across points, past

deep docks, bridge pilings and those first drop-offs outside of spawning pockets can result in a memorable arm-stretching.

Remember, Umbrella rigs with spinning blades like the YUMbrella Flash Mob and Flash Mob junior provide not only visual appeal but added lift to keep the rig running higher at slow speeds.

And this deal’s not only for the green-fish crowd. If you’re hankering for a crappie fry, try downsizing to a speck-sized umbrella rig like the YUMbrella Ultralight Tripod fitted with mini grubs. ■



Simple and straightforward, grubs offer a diverse array of potential.

Courtesy Z-Man

Tossing that weedless-rigged grub across the mat, I slowly swam it through the shallow puddles in the vegetation. It must've looked like one of the frogs traversing this course because the violent eruption that greeted my second cast concluded with a fat 7-pounder nursing a sore lip and a bruised ego.

- **FINESSE FLIPPING.** Fitted with a 3/0 to 4/0 hook and a pegged with a 1/8- to 3/16-ounce bullet weight, a grub is ready to sneak in and out of laydowns, invade gaps in grass beds, or skip under docks.

- **DANCE PARTNERS.** As flipping jig trailers, grubs can provide active or subtle pairings, depending on the type of tail.

When Hackney fits his Strike King Hack Attack jig with the Rage Twin Tail Menace, the grub's broader tail sections emit much less action than he'd get from a craw-style trailer.

"A grub is a good choice when I want a smaller-profile trailer that doesn't have a lot of action," Hackney said. "If I need to make my jig more compact, I'll cut about half an inch off the head."

Conversely, Hackney knows that splitting the tails on his Rage Twin Tail Menace and pairing the grub with a Strike King Pure Poison swim jig creates an appealing package for bass ready to rumble.

Somewhere in between, pro angler Adrian Avena tackles cold-water bass with a 1/4- to 1/2-ounce black/blue Zorro hair jig with a blue 4-inch twin-tail grub.

Avena trims the length of his hair skirt level with the accent color and thins the skirt by about a third. If the fish are exceptionally persnickety, he might also shorten his grub trailer.

"How I fish a hair jig is *slow*," Avena said. "Basically, I dead-stick it, and the combination of the thin legs on the twin tail and the hair on the jig give it all the action it needs."

He focuses his attention on those areas in which he's confident bass will be holding.

"The key structure during the winter months is hard cover because it's dense and it holds heat," Avena said. "So this tactic excels around wood and (riprap).

"I use this bait in typical wintering holes

with deep water or spots adjacent to deep water, hard cover and protection from the elements."

So for the cold weather remaining and the forthcoming warm season, don't overlook the grub's potential. They're certainly not the most-pretentious bait on the rack and it's a short walk to something with greater media exposure.

However, this workhorse bait serves many angling needs — often with surprisingly productive results.

"Honestly, to me, a grub is a successful bait to have in your boat year round," Upshaw said. "Whether you're fishing it on a swim jig, a ChatterBait, a jighead or a Scrounger, you will always catch bass on this bait." ■



A full-time freelance writer specializing in sport fishing, David A. Brown splits his time between journalism and marketing communications (www.tightwords.com).



By Phillip Gentry

THE JIG IS UP BUT WHICH ONE?

Crappie fishermen have dozens of styles of jigs from which to choose. Learn when and where to tie one on, and which styles match which fishing situations.

Walk into any tackle shop this time of year and you'll likely be overwhelmed with choices of crappie jigs to use to tempt one of the country's favorite gamefish.

How do you decide which one(s) to buy and use?

Mike Bridges is a tackle distributor who handles hundreds of name brands and knows them all. On top of that, he is a crappie fisherman and has fished all over the country for these popular panfish and is adept at using nearly every tactic imaginable. He provided a run-down for crappie fishermen on how to pick the right jig for the job, as well as a few pointers to help anglers experience better success.

Crappie fishing tactics fall into two categories: moving presentations or static presentations. Moving presentations are pulling, long-line trolling, and casting, while static presentations are tight-line trolling, single-pole jigging, and drifting. Dock shooting often requires features of both camps.



Artificial lures probably account for as many crappie every year as live minnows, because there are so many ways they can be used: trolling, casting, jigging and drifting.



Pony head jigs like this Road Runner account for a lot of crappie, especially in stained water where the small spinner provides vibration and flash.

JIGHEADS

The basis of the crappie lure is the jig-head, a hook with lead molded onto to with or without attachments.

- **ROUND-HEAD JIGS.** The round-head is used to provide a fluttering fall when fished. It is typically used with tight-lining, single-pole jigging or when shooting docks.

- **MINNOW-HEAD JIGS.**

Triangular-shaped jigheads lend their shape to swimming baitfish and are more hydro-dynamic, cutting through the water more efficiently. Minnow-head jigs are popular with long-line trolling and casting tactics.

- **PONY HEAD JIGS.** Sometimes referred to as Road Runner heads — after the manufacturer by the same name — pony heads employ small spinner blades on a swivel or split ring and add flash and vibration to the jighead. This is useful for stained water or other low-visibility conditions.

- **OTHER SHAPES.** Football heads, shad darts and other shapes see more limited use. Typically, the shape dictates whether the jig is designed to cut through the water or be more appealed when fished statically.

JIG BODIES

Jig bodies for crappie are typically either soft-plastic baits that are threaded on the hook by the angler or hair, feather or other synthetic materials tied to the jig body by the manufacturer.

- **TUBES.** Tube jigs are typically hollow body, with tentacles on the back end to provide static action. Tubes see more usage for slow, tight-line trolling or when single-pole jigging when the bait is presented vertically into structure to the fish.

- **CURLYTAILS.** These plastic bodies are designed to be pulled fast enough through the water so that the tails flutter, providing action to the bait. Curlytails see more use in long-line trolling and casting or any presentation generally above one-half mile per hour.

- **PADDLETAILS.** Paddletail usage is similar to curlytails in that the bait has to be moving forward to provide action.

- **STRAIGHT-TAILS.** Straight-tails, or stingers, mimic a static baitfish. Very streamlined, straight-tails see more use in dock-shooting, vertical-jigging, or other single-pole tactics.

- **CREATURE BAITS.** Similar to tubes, but designed to imitate specific, non-minnow type prey. Creatures are usually better suited for single-pole tactics or for bream fishing.

- **HAIR JIGS.** This category encompasses all hand-tied baits using hair, feather, marabou, chenille or a variety of other synthetic material. The design allows the baits to pulse or breathe when held still in the water. Static techniques like single pole jigging, dock shooting, drifting, or tight lining work best with hair jigs.

>

WHEN TO TIP A JIG WITH A MINNOW

For all the discussion about crappie jigs, live minnows account for at least half of the fish caught by anglers. No discussion about jigs is complete without a discussion of how and when to pair live minnows with jigs.

Some anglers will tip any jig with a minnow on almost every occasion and find success. It's generally accepted that jigs are tipped with minnows when the bite is slow, water temperatures are lower than 55 degrees, in low-visibility conditions or whenever it is desired to add scent to the jig.

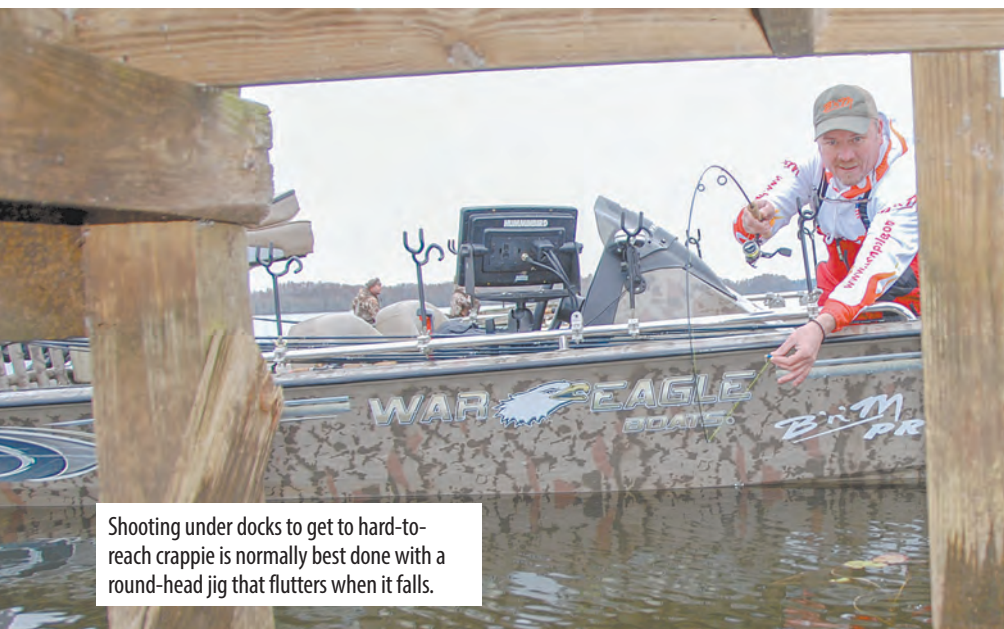
Tipping with minnows sees more usage from the static group of crappie-fishing techniques. Trolling and casting tactics rely on impulse bites from crappie who see a jig swimming through the water and instinctively eat it. Adding a minnow behind a jig designed to provide swimming action in the water often inhibits the action of the bait and negates its usage.

Jigs designed with pulsating or breathing action are better choices for minnows. The bait contains color, static action, flash or vibration, especially if using an underspin, pony head jighead. The minnow adds a natural feel and smell to the bait often causing the fish to hold on to the jig longer, giving the angler more time to detect the strike and set the hook.

Don't overlook a live minnow hooked on a naked jig head as a very deadly bait under the right conditions, either as a trolled or static bait.

Another aspect of tipping your jig with a minnow is that the bait adds bulk to your offering. Crappie anglers who fish where white crappie are found understand that white crappie frequently prefer a mouthful of bait, whereas too much mass may discourage black crappie.

Another trick to remember when tipping jigs with live minnows is to make sure to hook the minnow through the lips so it remains alive and active on the hook. Some anglers will hook the minnow so it rides upside down, increasing its struggles but decreasing its lifespan on the hook. ■



Shooting under docks to get to hard-to-reach crappie is normally best done with a round-head jig that flutters when it falls.

JIG COLORS AND WEIGHTS

Scores of articles can and have been written about choosing jig colors, both for jigheads and jig bodies. The basic rule of thumb revolves around water clarity and sunlight penetration. The clearer and cleaner the water, the better natural or opaque colors work. In stained, dark or muddy waters, brighter and/or darker colors get the nod.

Angler bias probably has more to do with color selection than fish preference. Successful anglers keep changing colors until they find one color that catches the most fish on a particular outing.

The deeper the strike zone, the heavier the jighead needed. Trolling anglers often go to great pains, using a gram scale bought at a local hardware store to measure weight in grams over accepting the weight, in percentage of an ounce, pre-printed on the package.

When trolling pony heads, the blade will cause the jighead to weigh more, but the resistance in the water of the spinning blade will affect how deep the jig runs. The type of blade, whether willow-leaf, Indiana or Colorado, will also affect the resistance and trolling depth a pony head will find.

Single-pole anglers typically want enough weight to keep contact with the bait in order to detect strikes, but not too heavy, as an overweight jig does not feel or act natural to the fish. ■



Phillip Gentry is a freelance outdoor writer and photographer who says that if it swims, walks, hops, flies or crawls, he's usually not too far behind.



Clockwise from top left:

- Roadrunner (pony head jig),
- Southern Pro tube jig,
- Bobby Garland Stroll-R on Bobby Garland Mo-Glo jighead,
- Curlytail grub on minnow-head jig,
- Hand-tied maribou jig with chenille body,
- Crappie Assassin paddletail,
- Roger Gantt hand-tied hair jig,
- Bass Pro Shops Crappie Craw (creature bait),
- Jelly belly hair jig,
- Hand-tied mylar jig on minnow-head jig,
- Fish Stalker Slab Tail jig.

GETTIN' FRESH

Hal Schramm

A large pallid sturgeon caught on a trotline in the Mississippi River near Natchez.

MISSISSIPPI'S OLDEST FISH

PREHISTORIC STURGEON STILL CALL MISSISSIPPI HOME

The Mississippi waters of the Mississippi River are home to pallid sturgeon and shovelnose sturgeon. Unlike many other sturgeon in North America and worldwide that migrate between the ocean and freshwater to complete their life cycle, the pallid and shovelnose sturgeon complete their life cycles entirely in rivers.

These fish descended from a common ancestor 80 million years ago and have changed little. They swam in the rivers when *Tyrannosaurus Rex* walked on land. If sturgeon could talk, they may put to rest the debates about why dinosaurs went extinct.

Two other freshwater sturgeons are known from the United States. Lake sturgeon are native to the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River basin. They occur as far south as Tennessee, and it is likely that lake sturgeon will be captured in the Mississippi waters of the Mississippi River.

The Alabama sturgeon is native to the Alabama River basin, including the Tombigbee River. The last Alabama

sturgeon was captured in 2007, and it died in captivity. Alabama sturgeon DNA was detected in Alabama River water samples in 2014 and 2015, suggesting the species may not be extinct as feared.

PALLID STURGEON: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

The pallid sturgeon once ranged from the upper Missouri River and Yellowstone River in Montana to the Gulf of Mexico outlet of the Mississippi River. Although the creation of large impoundments in the middle Missouri River system stopped successful spawning and recruitment, pallid sturgeon populations in the lower Missouri and Mississippi rivers remain viable, but individuals are rare. Pallid sturgeon are the only federally endangered fish species in the lower Mississippi River.

Pallid sturgeon grow to almost 6 feet, but individuals this large are probably more than 40 years old and extremely rare. Only a few of the 300 pallid stur-

geon we have collected in the Mississippi River were more than 3 feet long.

Many questions remain to be answered, but research conducted by the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, Mississippi State University, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey has determined that adult pallid sturgeon in the lower Mississippi River prefer current velocities of about 1.6 to 2.7 miles per hour and water depths of about 20 to 50 feet. Pallid sturgeon select sandbars, natural banks, rock revetment banks and downstream island tips and tend to avoid the main channel except during low river stages. Secondary channels are channels separated from the main channel by an island. These island-secondary channel complexes appear to be important habitat for pallid sturgeon, and activities are ongoing to restore flow through selected secondary channels.

Although the spawning habitat of pallid sturgeon has been documented in the Yellowstone River, where they spawn

the Mississippi River remains a mystery. U.S. Geological Survey scientists have recorded presumptive spawning on a rock-revetted bank in the lower Missouri River using DIDSON sonar.

SHOVELNOSE: A THREATENED SPECIES

In many years of fishing the Mississippi River with various nets and electrofishing, we captured fewer than a dozen shovelnose sturgeon. We learned that the most effective way to catch sturgeon in the lower Mississippi is to use trotlines baited with nightcrawlers; our catch with trotlines indicates that shovelnose sturgeon are at least as abundant as the plentiful blue catfish.

The shovelnose sturgeon is threatened, not because it is scarce but because it is targeted by commercial fishers for roe (caviar) and is very similar in appearance to the endangered pallid sturgeon. To avoid harvest of the endangered pallid sturgeon, the fishery for both river sturgeon has been closed.

The shovelnose sturgeon occurs throughout the Mississippi River basin, which includes the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio rivers and their tributaries. Shovelnose sturgeon grow to about 3 feet.

Like pallid sturgeon, they are riverine and prefer moderate currents and relatively deep water. They occupy a wide range of habitats and appear to orient to steep bottom slopes. ■



Hal Schramm is an avid angler and veteran fisheries biologist.

WANTON WASTE OR EXPENSIVE TASTE?

The finest caviar is made from sturgeon eggs. All sturgeon are slow growing, and many species, particularly the larger species most valued for their roe, do not reach sexual maturity and develop egg-bearing ovaries for 15 or more years. Harvest of sturgeon for their high-value roe has depleted populations worldwide. With depletion of sturgeon traditionally supplying roe, caviar producers have turned their attention to North American sturgeon, including the pallid and shovelnose sturgeon.

Pallid sturgeon females mature at ages nine or 10 and can spawn at least 40,000 eggs. The smaller shovelnose sturgeon females mature at seven or eight and can spawn approximately 10,000 eggs. The females are thought to

develop egg-bearing ovaries every three years. Lifetime fecundity — the eggs an individual female can spawn in a lifetime — might range from 50,000 eggs for a shovelnose sturgeon to at least a quarter million eggs for a pallid sturgeon.

Although sturgeon are sold for meat, usually smoked; the real money is made by the sale of the roe, appropriately called “black gold.” A lot of sturgeon eggs are never spawned, fertilized or developed into young sturgeon so somebody can put them on a cracker.

Enterprises are developing to rear sturgeon in tanks, detect when the females have mature ovaries using ultrasound, kill the fish and harvest the roe. These operations will help our ancient fish persist.

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Paul Elias



FEBRUARY BASSING AT ROSS BARNETT

FEBRUARY BASS ARE MOVING SHALLOW ON MISSISSIPPI'S MOST-FAMOUS LAKE

Although the weather may be chilly, the bass fishing at Ross Barnett in February will be heating up.

I think February is the best month of the year to fish Ross Barnett Reservoir for bass, which are in the prespawn mode and moving shallow. In many sections of the country — and Mississippi — you will often be fishing for bass in deep water in February, but on Ross Barnett, you'll catch most of your fish in water 3 feet deep or less.

This time of the year also is when bass like to get into the lily pad stems, unless a severe cold front arrives. But on those very cold February days, I'll be fishing the rocks. Basically those are the two February patterns for Ross Barnett.

PAD STEMS, REEDS

First, fish the lily pad stems and the reeds with a black/chartreuse or a crayfish color Baby 1-Minus crankbait on a medium-heavy Shimano Zodias bait-casting rod, alternating casts between

the two colors. I'll be fishing a Shimano Curado 200, a 6.2-to-1 retrieve-ratio reel, spooled with 23-pound White Peacock fluorocarbon. I'll run that Baby 1-Minus with a fairly fast retrieve into the lily pad stems and on top of the scattered patches of coontail moss that comes up from the bottom but doesn't reach the surface in the stems. Generally, I get my bites when the lure hits the stems and bounces off.

The most-productive part of the lake to fish for bass is from the Highway 43 bridge south on the east side of the lake. Even in February's shallow water, you can catch several bass weighing from 4 to 7 pounds each, since the females are full of roe.

If the bass aren't taking the fast Baby 1-Minus, I'll fish the same areas with a black/blue or plum Mann's HardNose lizard and a 1/16-ounce bullet weight in front with a No. 5/0 hook. I'll use a

7-foot-6 Zodias rod with a 70 XG 8.2-to-1 Shimano reel with 25-pound bass braid and no leader. I'll swim the lizard slowly underwater through the lily pad stems.

Another bait I'll use in the stems is a 1/4-ounce black/blue ChatterBait with a black/blue craw trailer that I'll cast on 23-pound fluorocarbon with a 7-foot-6, medium-heavy Zodias rod and a 6.2-to-1 Curado reel. If you encounter a strong cold front, a heavy rain and/or muddy water, particularly on the east side of Ross Barnett when you're fishing, then head for the rocks at the dam.

ON THE DAM ROCKS

I'll start off throwing a Mann's C4 crankbait on 20-pound line on a Curado 6.2-to-1 reel and a 7-foot, medium-heavy Zodias rod. I'll cast the crankbait as close to the rocks as possible and reel the lure parallel to the rocks, fairly slowly, to let the bill of the crankbait crash into

THE COLD TRUTH:

Rocky and riprap banks are bass magnets, especially late in the winter or early in the spring. Rocks will absorb and reflect the sun's heat, warming up the surrounding water by as much as a degree or two, which gives fish plenty of reason to call them home.

and kick off the rocks, not allowing it to get more than 3 feet deep. Most of your strikes will be in 1 to 3 feet of water.

The second bait I'll use is a Mann's Classic spinnerbait with gold blades and a chartreuse/white skirt that I'll bump off the rocks. I'll retrieve this spinnerbait slowly and fish it on 23-pound line with a 6.2-to-1 reel on a 6-foot-10 medium-heavy rod. The secret to successfully fishing these rocks is to cover plenty of water until you locate the bass. I'll keep that spinnerbait in 1 to 3 feet of water right up against the bank.

BARNETT BASS BASICS

With these two techniques, you'll catch numbers of yearling bass. I expect to catch about 15 bass during a day's fishing, and five of those 15 bass should weigh from 3 to 5 pounds each — possibly one will weigh 7 pounds or better. Right now, Ross Barnett is loaded with 4- to 5-pound bass.

On February's warm days, with relatively clear water, fish the lily pad stems on the east side of the lake. On very cold days or if the east side of the lake is muddy, fish the rocks by the dam. ■



Paul Elias of Laurel has fished 15 Bassmaster Classics and has more than \$1 million in career winnings, including one Bassmaster Classic Championship. He holds the current record for a four-day BASS tournament weigh-in with 132 pounds, 8 ounces, on Falcon Lake in Texas.



In February, Ross Barnett bass will be in the prespawn mode; you may catch a good number of bass that will weigh 4 pounds or more.

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A mature buck like this one is hard enough to kill without a hunter broadcasting his whereabouts while traveling to and from his stand.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

IS THE CONVENIENCE OF AN ATV WORTH THE DISTURBANCE WHEN IT COMES TO GETTING TO YOUR STAND UNDETECTED?

By the time you are reading this, unless you live in the extreme southern part of Mississippi, the 2017-2018 deer season will already “be in the books,” as they say.

While my memories are still fresh, I want to bring to the reader’s attention something that stood out to me while spending time in the whitetail woods.

Early one cold morning just before New Year’s Day weekend, I parked on the side of a blacktop road that flanks an area I hunt, with the idea of easing down an adjacent hardwood ridge to where the ridge-toe overlooks a hollow complex, a location that has proven in the past to be a favorite haunt of rutting bucks on the prowl.

The predawn sky was crystal clear, and the morning low was forecast to be in the mid- to upper-20s. I was dressed well for a long sit in the cold and slowly worked my way to a particular pine that I could sit against that afforded a great view of the bottom of the hollow. The great thing was that the location was high enough on the toe of the ridge to give me the equivalent elevation of a ladder stand.

THE WALK-IN

As I carefully walked in, the only sound I made was the low rustle of leaves under my boot soles. Upon reaching my destination, I was quite content, having not jumped or spooked any deer during my slow and careful walk in. After donning

my fleece neck gaiter, heavy insulated pile hat and gloves, I sat down and got myself properly situated at the base of the big pine.

There was no wind yet, so the super-cold morning air hung in the hollow with an almost palpable heaviness. We have all noticed many times how well sound can carry on a cold, still, heavy morning. The train’s whistle on the track 6 miles away sounded like it is a mile away. A dog’s bark from a mile away sounded like it was a quarter-mile or less away.

After sitting quietly for a while, I noticed a low, rumbling sound in the distance. I could instantly tell it was coming from an adjacent neighbor’s property and was an ATV, most likely a 4-wheeler. The

NOISY NEIGHBORS:

Sound carries surprisingly far on a cold winter morning. So why would a deer hunter, who stores his outer wear in a bag with pine boughs, bathes with unscented soap, sprays down with scent-killer spray and uses any number of other techniques to avoid detection, hop on an engine-propelled ATV to travel to and from his or her deer stand. This totally defies logic to me. Additional noise pressure in the woods cancels out, to a degree, a hunter's other best efforts to remain undetected.

low, rumbling noise continued, slowly increasing in volume, with only the pitch changing as the small, wheeled vehicle made twisting turns and went up and down grade changes.

The most-remarkable thing to me was that I could easily tell where the vehicle and its mounted hunter were through the whole its entire trip. I am just a slightly hard-of-hearing, almost 70-year-old human, and I could tell exactly what was going on and where, so what information was the noisy passage imparting to every deer in the nearby woods?

A whitetail deer's hearing is infinitely better than a human's ear, so was the hunter helping or hurting himself by riding to his stand rather than walking? Whitetail deer, especially wily, old bucks, are hard enough to see and outwit, without advertising one's presence and intentions to all within ear shot. And remember, being "within ear shot" on a cold, clear, still morning, means a much larger area than normal, especially with bare trees after leaf fall.

DID HE HAVE A CLUE?

Once the hunter on the ATV had reached his stand or a parking spot within easy walking distance, the vehicle stopped and the engine was turned off. As I saw it, the saddest thing for the hunter was that a human some distance away had been listening and knew where



One of the author's nephews with a fully mature buck that he took recently after a long, quiet hike to his stand.

he had come from, what route he had taken and where he had stopped. All of the deer in the area knew much, much more. I could only imagine how many were at that moment quietly slipping away from the hunter, all the way around the compass dial.

When that key was turned off and the sound stopped, that information was telegraphed in a circular pattern for all to hear. I could hear it all very well, and by using simple high school geometry, if the straight-line distance from that location to me represented the radius of a circle, a quarter-mile radius would equate to a minimum circle of disturbance of approximately 145 acres. A half-mile radius would equate to a circle of disturbance of 500 acres. I hope you

see my point.

That revelation should be shocking to all. I can't count how many frosty mornings I have spent listening to ATVs buzzing to and fro as they come and go from stands on neighboring properties. There is certainly a place for using ATVs, but I have become, over time, less and less enamored with their use going to and from a deer stand. ■



Bill Garbo is a petroleum engineer and avid whitetail hunter from Madison. He has lived and hunted out west and taken numerous big game species, but hunting big old mature southern whitetail bucks is his favorite pursuit by a country mile.

STICKS AND STRINGS

Sammy Romano

Want to see more than just trail camera photos of a big buck on your property? Learn to keep hunting pressure to a minimum.

LEARN TO MANAGE HUNTING PRESSURE

KEY TO SUCCESSFUL HUNTING IS KEEPING DEER FROM KNOWING YOU'RE AROUND

This month, I'm going to touch on a subject that applies to deer hunting with any weapon: managing hunting pressure on your herd. In my opinion, no single factor is more important to your success in terms of seeing and harvesting deer — especially mature bucks.

Not everyone is fortunate enough to control the land where they hunt, and not every hunter is after a trophy buck, but I hope every reader can take something away from this that will help them have more success in the woods. Although I'm focusing on mature bucks, a mature doe is every bit as intelligent, and is also a worthy opponent. Every day in the woods is a learning experience, and the following are some things that I

have personally found to be true.

READ AND REACT

From the time it is born, a buck learns from and reacts to hunting pressure. For the first few years of its life, luck plays a large part in its survival. But if a buck makes it to 3½ years of age, it becomes almost a completely different animal when it comes to hunting — or even just laying eyes on one. These bucks have learned from their encounters with hunters and are fortunate to survive that long.

Each encounter or close call causes the buck to eliminate the habit that exposed it to that danger. Let me be clear: a buck's wariness or lack of daytime movement is a reaction to past negative stimuli caused by hunting pressure. By eliminating as

many of these negative stimuli as possible, the bucks on a given property will often become more visible and easier to pattern effectively.

Many times over the years, I have had customers walk into our archery shop and tell me all about "Old Split Toe," the huge buck that haunts their trail-camera images — but only in the middle of the night. It could be the buck is bedded a long way from their property, but oftentimes it's due to sloppy hunting habits or excessive traffic that can be corrected or reduced.

Tree-stand or ground-blind location is key to minimizing pressure. Ask any hunter who consistently harvests mature bucks, and a majority will tell you the most-important factor in stand location is

The author killed this hit-list buck, nicknamed "Saban," on Christmas Eve — after taking plenty of care not to put too much pressure on him.

access. Being able to sneak in and out of your stand area undetected by deer is huge. Let's say you have a tree stand in the highest deer-traffic area on your property, but you have to walk through a bedding area to access it. Or you have to climb down into a field full of feeding deer to leave that stand at dark. You've just shot yourself in the proverbial foot, with not much chance of success — but very good odds of educating a lot of deer to the fact they're being hunted. It won't take long for the herd to adjust and feed elsewhere, or become nocturnal. A better option would be to relocate the first stand to an area of lower deer traffic — but with better hunter access. In the case of the evening field-edge stand, having someone else pick you up by driving in with a vehicle would be a better option.

SCENT CONTROL

Managing human scent is another key to minimizing pressure on your herd. Your scent can linger long after you leave the area, and deer are not fans of it, believe me. Showering with scent-free soap before each hunt, washing clothing properly, wearing scent-control clothing and/or the use of an ozonator all help to minimize your "human scent footprint."

I'm always amazed at how many hunters don't play the wind to their advantage. Hunting a stand on the wrong wind is taking a huge gamble, and usually results in an unsuccessful hunt and an educated deer herd. Study the wind carefully and use it to your advantage — deer definitely use it to theirs. I use the Weather Channel's hourly forecast, which shows wind speed and direction, to anticipate the winds. That way, I don't have to climb down in mid-hunt because of an unex-



pected wind shift.

If you reduce pressure on you herd, you should enjoy greater numbers of both deer sightings, and harvests. Deer are far better at patterning hunters than most people realize, because their survival depends on it. Use low impact hunting tactics and scent control to increase your future success.

A BUCK CALLED 'SABAN'

We have been naming our bucks after SEC coaches lately. The top buck on our hit list was a deer we named Saban. As LSU fans, we wanted to outsmart him the most. For three years, he avoided us, with only a few trail camera images each

year, mostly at night. This shows how adept these animals are at patterning hunters. Even so, by managing hunting pressure, we were able to close the deal, and the old buck's luck finally ran out. This was a gun hunt, due to the necessity of accessing and exiting the field without bumping deer that were feeding there daily. ■



Sammy Romano is a lifelong hunter who has worked in the archery industry for more than 24 years. His expertise includes compounds and crossbows. He can be reached at samboka31@aol.com.

LURE REVIEW

Don Shoopman

The 3-inch Vudu Vixen soft plastic shad imitation comes in 14 colors. A 3½-inch model is due out this summer.

THE VUDU VIXEN:

MEET EGRET BAITS' 'TOUGH
AS HELL' SHAD IMITATION

Speckled trout and other saltwater species feed on shrimp and baitfish, shad, mullet, cocahoes and more.

Take away shrimp, which usually are in salty and brackish systems for only so long each year, and that leaves only the baitfish, a development that prompted many successful speckled trout fishermen over the past few years to request a baitfish-shaped soft plastic from Egret Baits. The company makes the wildly popular — among speckled trout and redfish anglers — Vudu Shrimp, which was followed by the equally popular Vudu Mullet.

"We get calls and emails all the time saying, 'Why don't you make a cocahoe?' and 'What are you going to do next?'" said Ken Chaumont, owner of Egret Baits.

With the shrimp side of the food chain covered, Egret set out to work on a baitfish lure.

Chaumont and his team developed the Vudu Vixen, which is tough as nails and already has a proven track record on getting speckled trout to bite.

Chaumont, 63, who has been in the artificial lure manufacturing business 34 years, pointed out shrimp are in the water for a relatively short time — but baitfish are always present.

"So we modeled it after shad. That's the reason for the shad-style baits. When you look at the cocahoe, they're everywhere," he said.

"We've got another winner. I think this will be as big as the Vudu Shrimp."

DURABLE CONSTRUCTION

Just like Vudu Shrimp, Vudu Vixens, which hit the market in November, are made with almost indestructible TPE, a mix of rubber and plastic synthetic materials. The benefit of using thermoplastic elastomers is their ability to stretch and return to their original shape, thus creating a longer life and better physical range than other materials.

"We call it tough as hell. It's tougher and more durable than soft plastics. It's in a million products. TPE is a great product

for the future of fishing," Chaumont said.

Two other qualities are that TPE doesn't melt and paint doesn't run or bleed when it is painted. Chaumont said one of the most ideal storage spaces for the lures is a Plano Pocket tacklebox.

The Vudu Vixen is 3 inches long, and has a built-in ¼-ounce leadhead. A 3½-inch model should be on the market in June, he said.

There are two Vudu Vixens in each pack; they come in 14 colors armed with a sharp, strong hook, with a suggested retail price of \$7.99.

"I believe you can catch 500 fish in one pack," he said.

The first prototypes arrived from overseas this summer. All Vudu, prototypes are pearl, so that is the Vixen color Chaumont and others fed speckled trout and other saltwater gamefish for half of 2017.

"We hit schoolies all year long," he said. "On my line, one bait has been tied on 3½ months. I've caught over 200 fish on one bait — average-size trout, redfish

A built-in 1/4-ounce leadhead and painted-on glow eyes are just two features of Egret's new Vudu Vixen.



and flounder.”

Ray Christy, Chaumont’s long-time fishing buddy who lives at Hebert’s Landing on the eastern shore of Big Lake, has caught more than 100 speckled trout on the Vudu Vixen he has been throwing since June, Chaumont said.

Another Louisiana angler with years of experience behind him has been wearing out the speckled trout with the new soft plastic out of Houma.

Capt. Bill Lake, a veteran charter guide who owns Bayou Guide Service, has been a longtime believer in Egret Baits and is sold on the Vudu Vixen.

“It’s a really nice-looking little bait, a little 3-inch shad. It’s a brand new product that’s tough as hell,” Lake said. “It’ll be a great bait to target fish (this winter.)”

Chaumont likes to fish the Vudu Vixen on 12-pound monofilament with a 10-inch, 17-pound flourocarbon leader.

Chaumont said he is proud of “another key feature” on the Vudu Vixen: the lure’s eyes.

“We developed a painted eye so you can’t destroy it,” he said, noting the eyes glow. “Every Vudu Vixen has glow eyes.”

For more information on the Vudu Vixen and other Egret Baits, go to egretbaits.com or call 318-256-6904. ■



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.

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COOKING ON THE WILD SIDE

Jerry Dilsaver

BLACKENED VENISON STEW

A NICE, WARM STEW IS THE PERFECT END TO A FEBRUARY DAY

Winters in the South typically aren't harsh, at least not for more than a few days at a time, but there will be a few times it's nice to have a pot of something simmering and ready to eat to help warm up.

The past few winters have had at least one snow or ice event where some warm, comfort food that is ready to eat is a good thing and always welcome. The enticing aroma wafting from this stew or soup goes straight to your senses and kicks your hunger into high gear — and that's not bad. This is one of those meals your grandparents would have called "Good and good for you too!"

While it's the shortest month, February can usually be divided into two weather segments.

The first couple of weeks might be cold, like a normal winter, but by the middle of the month, the days are usually warming, and there will be several stretches of sunny days with high temperatures reaching the 60s and occasionally 70. Sportsmen are still afield chasing quail, rabbits and other small game, and some are fishing, and this stew hits the spot when they walk into the lodge or hunting camp hungry and cold. ■



Stews are hearty meals that take the edge off the chill after a February day afield or in the boat. Using venison and blackening seasonings make for a great time at the table. (INSET) A bread bowl is a unique service option.

TIP!

If you don't have meat already cut in stew-sized pieces, you can cut up a roast or steak and get the same effect.

BLACKENED VENISON STEW

There are numerous recipes for venison stews, and most are good. It's difficult to go wrong when simmering venison in a hearty stock with potatoes, carrots and onions. The ingredients are tasty individually, and they're even better simmered together.

The difference in this recipe begins with soaking the meat in root beer and Mexican hot sauce. The carbonation in the root beer will help tenderize a tough, older deer and also help hide the beginnings of freezer burn on a package that got shuffled under something and lost for a while. Mexican hot sauce, like Texas Pete Sabor, has a nice flavor that isn't particularly hot and also adds to the tenderizing.

Blackened seasoning began in Louisiana as a way to cover issues with older meat and gradually worked its way into a mainstream seasoning. I use it lightly to medium and find it is all the seasoning the stew needs. Don't fully cook the meat, but sear it just enough to add the blackened flavor, and then use the drippings to wilt the onions and to flavor the roux that begins the stew. Since I'm usually cooking this inside, I use vegetable oil instead of butter for the sear, as it doesn't smoke as much. If you're outside, using butter will make the stew a little richer, but be careful not to burn it.

The taste can be tailored to your preferences. If you want it really spicy, use a lot of the blackened seasoning, and if your palate, family or friends prefer a milder flavor, then just dust the meat. The flavor can always be kicked up a notch or two for those

PREPARATION:

Cut venison into approximately 1- to 2-inch pieces. Put 1½ cups of room-temperature root beer in a Zip-Lock bag and mix in a few drops of Texas Pete Sabor sauce. Add the venison pieces to the bag. If the root beer doesn't cover all the meat, add enough root beer to barely cover it. Swish in bag to mix throughout, then squeeze the bag remove all air. Allow to marinate at room temperature for 30 minutes to an hour.

Cut potatoes in half and chop onions very coarsely. Pour root beer off venison pieces and squeeze to remove as much as possible. Sprinkle blackened seasoning onto venison, and turn with hands to coat all sides. For a spicier dish, add more blackened seasoning; use less for a milder taste.

Put the vegetable oil in a large, deep, cast-iron pan and heat on high until it begins smoking. Dump the venison into the frying pan and stir well for two to three minutes. Remove the venison and reduce heat to medium. Use the venison drippings to heat the onions to opaque while stirring frequently, then remove them. Mix the flour thoroughly with the warm water. Pour the water/flour mixture into the pan and stir while it thickens. When the water/flour mixture starts to brown and become a roux, stir in the beef broth and continue warming to a low boil. When the broth boils, add the potatoes and carrots and return to a low boil.

Preheat the oven to 375. Boil for 15 minutes, then stir in the venison and onions and return to a boil. Cover the pan and place on the middle rack in the oven for an hour. This can be done on the stove over low/medium heat, but requires stirring every few

TIP!

Marinating meat in a carbonated beverage like a soda product will help tenderize it.

who prefer a more robust flavor, but it's near impossible to tone it down without diluting the stew's broth.

The mini golden potatoes and carrot slices were started simply as ways to make the preparation easier. However, the golden potatoes are very creamy and add more than just being easy and filling. If you can't find them in mini size, use large, golden potatoes and cube them to about an inch or so. They really do taste better than other potatoes.

This recipe came about as a way to make something different from most venison stews, a little heartier and with a little more kick for folks who would enjoy it — and to add some variety to the lunch that had been cooked at a hunting club the previous several weekends.

Hopefully, you have some venison in your freezer and would like to try this. If you don't have stew pieces, you can cut up a couple of steaks or a small roast. It tastes good enough you'll be glad you did. Enjoy! ■

INGREDIENTS:

1-1½ pounds venison pieces
1 pkg. (1½ pounds) Little Potato Company Boomer Gold potatoes. You may substitute full-sized potatoes, but golden potatoes are best.
2 sweet onions
1½ cup carrot slices
Blackened seasoning (to taste)
1 tbsp flour
3 cups beef broth
2 tbsp vegetable oil
1½ cups warm water
Root beer
Texas Pete Sabor Mexican-style hot sauce (to taste)
1 cup wild rice. An option is to serve in sourdough mini loaves.



minutes to prevent burning. Prepare the wild rice by the directions on its package. Serve the venison stew over the wild rice (or in a hollowed-out, mini-loaf of sourdough bread).

This is a pretty complete meal. The only thing I would consider adding is some warm sourdough bread to help get the last out of the bowl. If by some chance you aren't full after eating a bowl of this stew and would like a little dessert, bread pudding is an excellent choice. ■



Jerry Dilsaver of Oak Island, N.C., is a freelance writer, as well as a former national king mackerel champion fisherman.

Taking the time to go through your boat and trailer to identify and repair any problems now will ensure you can enjoy your days on the water when fishing really cranks up again.



BOAT TIPS TO GET READY FOR FISHING SEASON

By Andy Crawford

If you're a die-hard hunter, the odds are pretty good you haven't looked at your fishing boat very much since October. So with hunting seasons finally closing out, it's time to pull the cover off the old girl and get her ready for the spring fishing bonanza.

But don't just hook up and head to the landing. Instead, take a few minutes to ensure everything is in working order before you launch.

"Most people wind up just parking the boat (during hunting season) — don't

check batteries, don't charge batteries, stuff like that," said Ken Sherman, of Front to Back Boat Service in Baton Rouge, La. "So you pretty much need to go through a whole go-through, especially with this cold weather that we've had."

Sherman starts by ensuring batteries will hold a charge, but don't stop there. The extremely cold temperatures that settled over the South in December and January might have caused all kinds of problems.

"I just had a lower unit (that) had water

in the lower unit, and it burped oil out the sippie hole, froze the lower unit up and (the owner) had seal problems," Sherman said. "We had to rebuild the lower unit."

A clue that this has happened to your outboard can be seen in the garage.

"You're going to walk in and see an oil spot right underneath it," Sherman said. "If you've got an oil spot underneath it, you might as well call (a repair shop) and line it up to rebuild it."

Water freezing inside bilge and livewell/aerator pumps also can cause damage,



Andy Crawford

so be certain to check these important pieces of equipment.

Sherman also recommended pulling the engine's cowling and looking over the outboard block to find any obvious problems.

But the best bet is to have the outboard serviced every year by a certified mechanic to change out the lower unit oil, rebuild the water pump and ensure there aren't any mechanical issues that will leave you paddling to the landing.

"If you do (preventative maintenance) every year, you never have to worry about

it," Sherman said. "Get on a yearly basis where you do the service every year. You'll be surprised that your problems disappear. Change the fuel filters once a year; do the water pump impeller once a year; change the oil once a year. It's cheap insurance.

"Oil is cheap. Getting it put in is cheap. When you crack a housing, it gets expensive. When you've got to start rebuilding lower units, it starts getting expensive."

He also pulls a bit of fuel out of the tanks to ensure no water has accumulated.

"Pull a fuel sample and let it sit to see if it separates," Sherman said. "Smell the fuel. If you've got a full tank and you smell the fuel and it smells like old varnish, I'd pump it out and put fresh fuel in it.

"Old fuel in these new motors — they just do not like it."

While Sherman runs ethanol through his Mercury 250 ProXS, he always uses a quality fuel additive. His weapon of choice is Ultimix.

"Some people call it a mechanic in a bottle," Sherman said. "It's along the lines of Stabile and Sea Foam, but a few years ago, they took it to (Texas) and it tested the best of the best.

"I run pumped fuel. I don't run premium, 92 octane; I run pumped fuel, 87 octane. But I always use Ultimix."

He said he just adds the recommended amount when he fills up to keep things running smoothly.

"If you're running, it as a constant thing and something happens and you get hurt at work or you put up the boat for three months for hunting season, (that outboard) will still run when you pull it out," Sherman said.

Of course, just because the batteries, electronics and pumps on your boat check out doesn't mean much if you end up stuck on the side of the road with a blown bearing.

So Sherman said it's imperative to inspect the trailer.

"I would pull the wheel bearings off

and check the grease, because a lot of times the grease gets a water mixture in there, and you don't want to just slap grease on them without looking," he said. "Sometimes you can pump a little grease in and you see grease pump out and you're good, but if you see water come out of it, I'd definitely repack it."

Water in the grease could have frozen during the winter, blowing the seals as it expands. But even if that doesn't happen, water will reduce the effectiveness of the grease and result in damage.

But forget the old maxim of pumping grease into a bearing until it squirts out the back.

"You really don't want to do it until it squirts out," Sherman said. "What you want to do is pump it until you feel it get tight. You don't just pump it in to blow it all out."

The key is to ensure there's enough grease in the bearing to keep the hub cool without blowing the seals.

Checking Bearing Buddies to ensure they look good is another check-list items.

"Getting (to the landing) is critical, because you don't want to be sitting on the side of the highway," Sherman said. "As cheap as this stuff is, it's cheap insurance."

Finally, Sherman said it's important to look at that one thing we boaters detest: trailer lights.

If you have old incandescent lights, it's just a matter of time before you have bulbs go out — again.

So Sherman recommended moving to LED lights, which are waterproof and much more durable.

"If you tie-wrap all your wires up tight and keep all that clean, put LED lights on (the trailer)," Sherman said. "LED lights have gotten to be so much better. If someone has to change out any lights and they don't put LED lights on it, I think they're wasting their time.

"LEDs are going to be the longest lasting lights." ■

SMARTPHONE APP PROVIDES MORE RELIABLE WIND FORECASTS

By Devin Denman

You've probably heard the old saying, "Ya gotta go to know." If you're not familiar, it just means that you really don't know the fishing conditions until you actually launch the boat and head out.

But it's nice to at least have an idea as to what the winds will do — especially since wind dictates everything in a fishing trip.

I've always had a pretty rough idea about wind predictions with the NOAA Marine forecast, which I have used for years. But recently, I've discovered a more-reliable source for wind predictions.

This tool has significantly improved my fishing trips: It's called the Windfinder smartphone app.

Experience has shown me that

Windfinder works the best, and here are some reasons why:

PRECISION FORECASTING

The marine forecast I used for many years only predicted winds on a 24-hour basis. So if there was an afternoon slump, or winds actually picked up unexpectedly, that wasn't included in the forecast.

This made for missed fishing opportunities — and some bumpy rides back to the launch.

However, Windfinder doesn't lack in this area. Its forecast is more exact, reporting in three-hour periods instead of the less-precise 24-hour timeframe.

So should the wind lay down for a few hours, you'll know — and you can

take advantage of it. This additional information opens up new fishing opportunities, especially in places like Lake Pontchartrain, where there is little protection from strong gusts.

Instead of 24-hour predictions from the NOAA Marine forecast, the Windfinder app provides wind estimates for specific locations every three hours.

A BIGGER PICTURE

With Windfinder I'm also able to view current wind speeds across the entire state, giving me an idea as to what's going on all along Louisiana's coast.

And because of its easy-to-use interface, I'm able to discover new weather stations providing wind data I need to make informed decisions before I launch the boat.

Editor's Note: Devin Denman is an avid inshore fisherman who writes the Louisiana Fishing Blog. To read more of his articles, visit lafishblog.com

Instead of leaving your batteries cooking 24/7 on a trickle charge, unplugging the charger after all the lights turn green can help protect you from damaging power surges.

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HOW TO KEEP BATTERIES PROPERLY CHARGED

By Andy Crawford

Andy Crawford

We've all been there. You know, you walk out to the boat the morning of the trip you've been planning for a week and the batteries aren't charged.

No power. Nada. Zip.

Then it's off to blow your budget on a new set of batteries.

But Front to Back Boat Service's Ken Sherman offered some thoughts on maintaining the components that start the outboard and run all the electronics we count on.

His first piece of advice is to stop leaving the trickle charger on 24/7. This flies in the face of some other experts' advice, but Sherman said there's a simple reason.

"In reality ... you see these vicious storms we have come through here with all the lightning," he explained. "Well, what happens is: you leave (the charger) plugged into 110 (volts), lightning strikes down the road, hits the power line, surges — bam, burns the charger.

"Next thing you know we've got round batteries, and the batteries are not in good shape."

He said trickle chargers have a component called a fet that regulates the charging amps being sent to the battery. When a battery fully charges, the fet kicks in to reduce the amps to a trickle — thus the name "trickle charger."

If a surge hits the charger and burns out

that regulator, the charger sends a full charge to the batteries — even when full charge is reached. The result can be an overcharged battery.

There's an easy test to ensure you don't have an overcharged, flooded-cell battery that could leave you dead in the water.

"If you push the ends of a flooded-cell battery, it should be soft," Sherman said. "If (your batteries are) hard, you just as soon look at getting some new ones."

To guard against overcharging, Sherman plugs in his charger after a trip until all the lights turn green, and then he unplugs the charger until he's ready to go out again.

"Just before you leave, plug it in, let it go through a cycle," he said. "The good thing about it is that if you did have something happen to a charging system with lightning striking it and you didn't catch it, you're not going to burn a battery up by leaving it on all the time.

"So if you charge it when you get in (from a trip), get up the next morning (and see) all green lights — unplug it. You know you're leaving on Saturday morning; Friday you get in from work, plug it in. You may plug it in and within 10 to 15 minutes, it's all green, you can unplug it."

He said doing this will prolong the life of your batteries.

But just how long should a battery last?

That depends on the type of battery you use.

It's a safe bet most anglers still use flooded-cell batteries because they are widely available and are generally the least-expensive option.

Sherman said maintaining the proper water level is important in getting the most out of these batteries.

If you find a battery isn't lasting all day, you can use a conventional charger to force a full charge.

"Get a good punch on it, get it warmed up, get it to pull up to temperature, and you may be able to save it," Sherman said. "But you're probably going to find your day usage may not be as long if you're working on a saved (flooded-cell) battery."

The simple fact is flooded-cells just don't last as long as the more-expensive AGM batteries.

"If you've got two years on a flooded-cell battery and you're a hard-core fisherman, pull them out and put new ones in," Sherman said. "That's the best move you can make on flooded-cell batteries."

AGM batteries that are properly maintained, on the other hand, can last for years. That balances out the initial cost factor.

"The new AGM batteries are really getting the prices down where they are very affordable," Sherman said. "These batteries are lasting six, seven, eight years."

And, even better, AGM models aren't as susceptible to cold weather. ■

You can secure the hooks of your double rig by running one jighead through a rod guide, back up towards the other jighead and then just hooking the two together. If the guides are too small, just wrap one pigtail around the reel stem and then secure the hooks together.



Devin Denman

TYING AND SECURING A DOUBLE RIG

By Devin Denman

Catching speckled trout two at a time is a hallmark of an excellent fishing trip — and few rigs are better for the job than the double rig. The best way to quickly fill limits means two hooks are absolutely better than one — but how do you go about tying a double rig?

It's easy. It's just a length of leader line, usually 20-pound test monofilament, with a Figure 8 loop knot tied into it with uneven pigtails.

Jigheads, normally a ¼-ounce each, are tied to the two pigtails with a palomar or improved clinch knot. After that, use whichever soft-plastic lure your heart desires. (I like Matrix Shad.)

HOW DO YOU SECURE A DOUBLE RIG FOR TRAVEL?

The double rig is an awesome way to load up on trout, but it can be a pain to secure when not in use. Normal rigs utilizing one hook are simply affixed to the hook keeper on your rod, but the

double rig has two. So what do you do with that second hook?

Perhaps you've already had that experience: one jighead secured, while the other is flailing about wildly, becoming tangled on everything around it. Not only can this damage your equipment, but it's also dangerous. Hooks need to be secured, not loose.

AN EASY FIX

The best way to secure a double rig is to run one jighead through a rod guide, back up towards the other jighead and then just hook the two together. If the guides are too small, just wrap one pigtail around the reel stem and then secure the hooks together.

Editor's Note: Devin Denman is an avid inshore fisherman who writes the Louisiana Fishing Blog. To read more of his articles, visit lafishblog.com.

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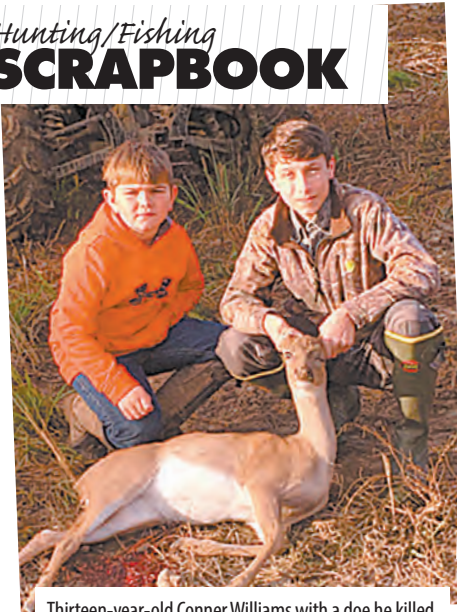
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SCRAPBOOK



Thirteen-year-old Conner Williams with a doe he killed just south of Jackson.



Louis Burroughs holds up a 35-pound catfish he got in Aberdeen.



Four-year-old Jackson Allen proudly shows off a small bass he caught.



LEFT: James Meriwether, 14, of Natchez killed this 8-point on Dec. 30, 2017, in Adams County.



Daylon Collins, 13, of Pass Christian caught this 9½-pound striped bass while fishing with his dad in Bay St. Louis on Nov. 26, 2017.



Lee Amedee killed this 11-point buck in Fayette.

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HEYBO FISHING SHIRTS

By Andy Crawford

Gone are the days of choosing between caking yourself with sunscreen or wearing bulky long-sleeved shirts to hide from the sun's UV rays. Now there are lightweight performance shirts that offer protection and comfort — and Heybo has entered the market with a bang.

The company is based in South Carolina and offers a full line of fishing shirts to meet any need.

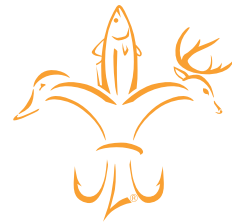
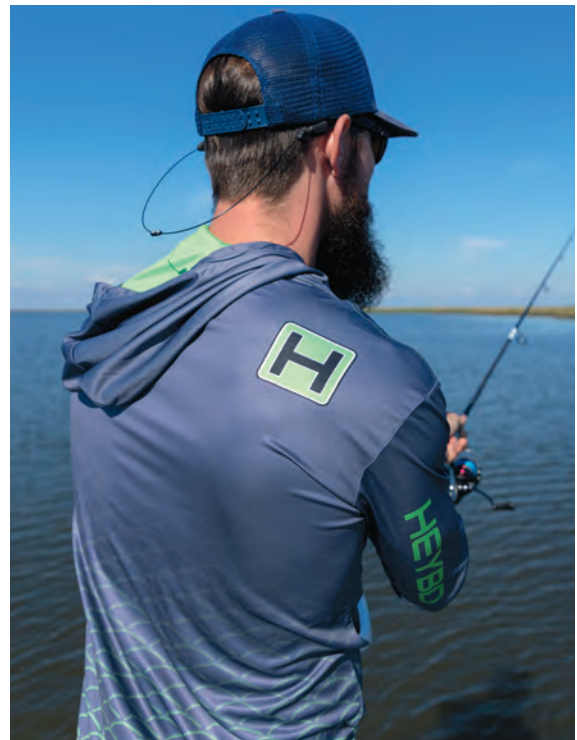
Choose from long- or short-sleeved performance shirts with or without hoodies, or you can go with button-up options for a more finished look. All are designed with comfort in mind.

The company's background in the graphic T-shirt industry shows in the proliferation of design options, from the subdued to wild splashes of color.

And there are even options that fit the boat and the restaurant equally well.

Prices start at \$39.99.

More Info: www.heybooutdoors.com



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JACK HAMMER: A NEW, IMPROVED CHATTERBAIT

By Andy Crawford

Z-Man turned the fishing world on its head when it introduced its ChatterBait, the first vibrating jig that just flat out catches fish of all kinds.

And now it's elevating the line of lures with the Jack Hammer.

This version of the lure is a partnership between Z-Man and Japanese lure manufacturer Evergreen, and the result is a lure composed of the highest grade materials possible.

The JackHammer features Gamakatsu hardware, including a heavy wire flipping hook with the proper length, gap and point to ensure high hook-up ratios. And the double-wire trailer keeps soft plastics securely in place.

A redesigned stainless steel blade enhances the action of the lure. The head has a flat bottom and low center

of gravity combined with the blade to allow the lure to start vibrating quickly and move in an erratic, side-to-side motion that perfectly mimics a fleeing baitfish.

"It's more aggressive," Z-Man's Denis Breaud said.

The design allows the lure to easily deflect off of cover, as well as skip beneath docks and overhanging trees.

As if all that weren't enough, a channeled groove along the bottom of the head positions the blade low enough to strike the head, producing a signature chattering sound.

The premium hand-tied silicon skirts come in 10 colors, and the heads and blades come in highly detailed color-matched schemes.

The Jack Hammer retails for \$15.99.

More Info: www.zmanfishing.com



QMAXX'S BLU

Gun owners have a long menu of choices when it comes to protecting their firearms, and a St. Louis-based company, QMaxx Products, has joined the fray with a pretty powerful entry.

QMaxx's "BLU" is a one-step gun and knife cleaner, lubricant and rust/corrosion preventative that comes in packages as small as 2 ounces up to 1 gallon — a big drawing card for professional gunsmiths.

BLU can be used to clean firearms, from rifles and shotguns to blackpowder weapons, and it can be sprayed on all surfaces to prevent rust. It dries quickly and is not oily or tacky, and it prevents the blued or steel surfaces of firearms from picking up any dust, grit, grime or even fingerprints. The company boasts that salt-fog tests in laboratories prove that BLU protects up to 300 percent longer than leading gun oils.

BLU is available in wipe packets, lubricating pens, 2-, 8- and 16-ounce spray bottles and a 1-gallon bulk container, priced from \$1.99 for individual wipe packets to \$28.99 for the 16-ounce trigger spray bottles.

More Info: www.qmaxxproducts.com

G. LOOMIS E6X

Lightweight, strong, and sensitive. That's the recipe for a fishing rod that bass anglers strive to find, and it can be elusive, especially when you add affordability into the mix. Or at least it used to be. But the G. Loomis E6X changes that.

With modern technology and materials, its become common to find some of the lightest rods on the market are also the strongest. But that combination has always come at a price that has kept many of those rods out of reach of the average angler.

This E6X won the "Best New Freshwater Rod" award at ICAST in 2015, and it's now available in 30 models of spinning and casting rods, including numerous technique-specific models, as well as Classic models that are good for all-around use.

So whether you're flipping, pitching, jigging, cranking, or using spinnerbaits, swimbaits and everything in between, the E6X has a model to fit your needs.

The rods are available at Academy Sports.

www.academy.com/shop/pdp/g-loomis-e6x-freshwater-casting-rod#repChildCatSku=104981499

SILVERSPORT



Hunters have long been trying to block or camouflage their natural smell from game animals, using scent sprays to hide those aromas, storing their hunting clothes in containers that keep them away from unwanted odors or even buying clothes treated with scent blockers.

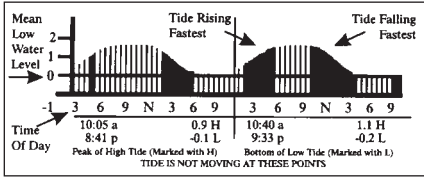
NFL Hall of Famer Franco Harris has entered the market through his Pittsburgh-based company, Silversport, which is offering hooded sweatshirts, t-shirts and socks treated with his Silver Clean technology in Mossy Oak camouflage.

Silversport hunting clothes are infused with nano-sized particles of silver — silver ions — that block odor-causing microorganisms from attaching to or penetrating clothing, which largely prevents the human body odor that game animals can detect with their superior sense of smell.

Balacavas, neck guards, camouflage hoodies, t-shirts and socks are available from Silversport in Mossy Oak. Prices start at \$15.

More Info: www.silversport.com



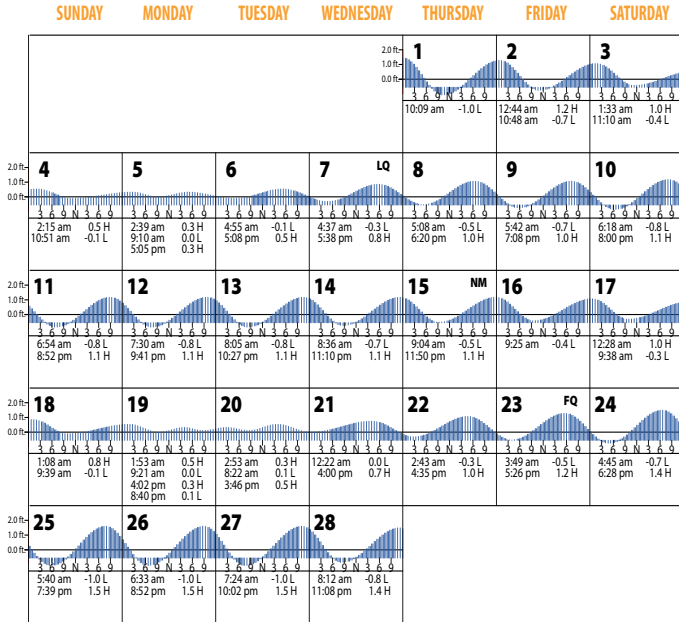


How to use the **SPORTSMAN** Tide Guide

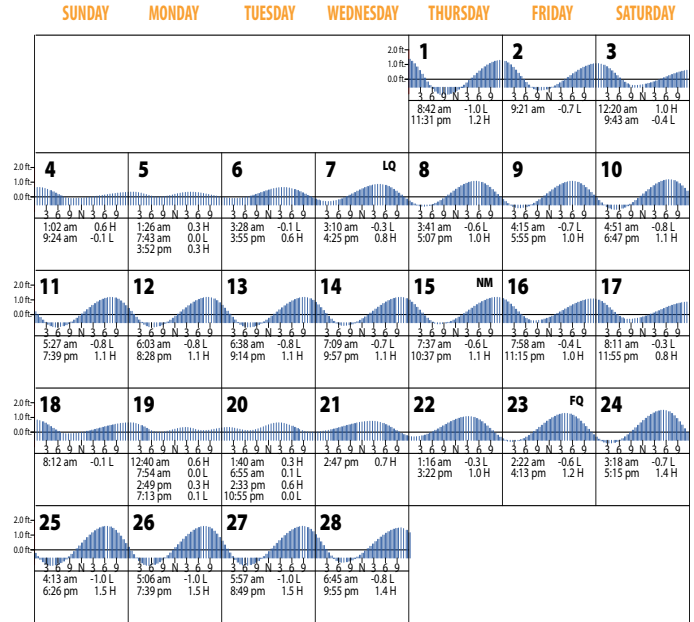
Fish feed most actively when the tide is moving. The Mississippi Sportsman has made it simple to spot the most active feeding periods each day in the TIDE GUIDE. Just fish those times indicated in black.

Be sure to visit our web site for more tide locations: <http://www.ms-sportsman.com>

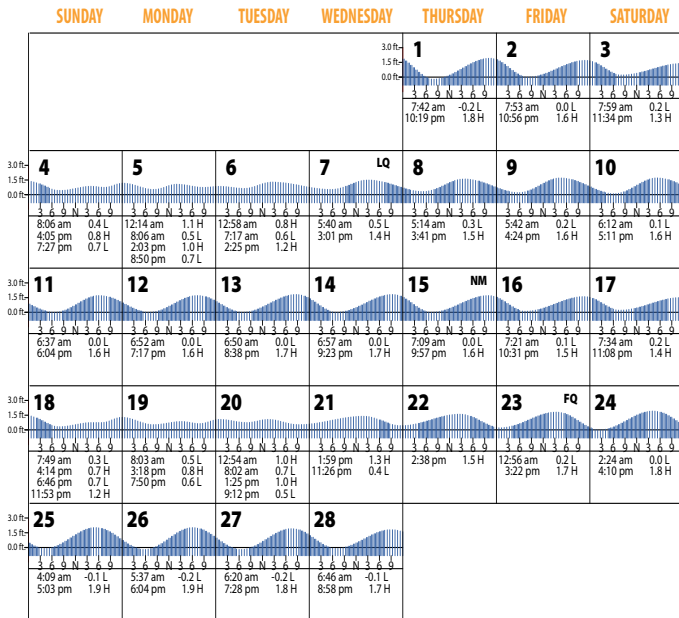
Bay St. Louis Entrance



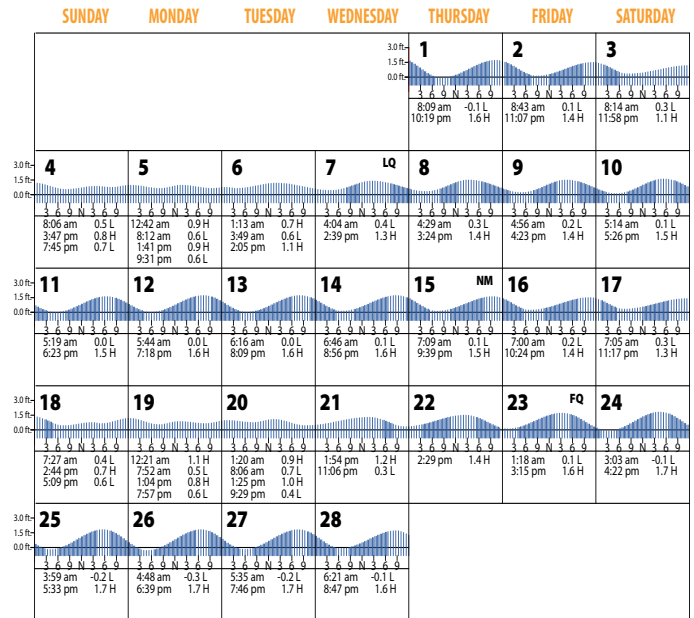
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