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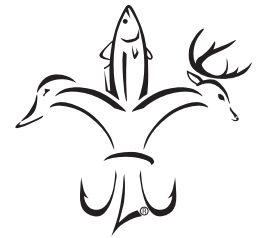
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There's nothing like March in Mississippi, when the crappie are overtaken by the urge to spawn, which puts them in range of an awful lot of fishermen with a hankering for sweet filets. Photo by Dan Kibler.

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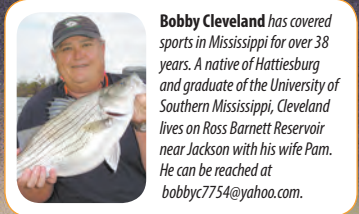


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Outdoor UPDATE with Bobby Cleveland



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.



MARCHING INTO SPRING MAGIC

IT'S A MONTH OF GOBBLING, SHALLOW FISH AND EXCITING ACTION

The majestic tom turkey, whose gobbles can reduce a man to trembles, is the star of Mississippi's outdoors in March.

As February fades in the rear-view mirror, Mississippi sportsmen can flip the page on the calendar, and flip the switch on a season with so many outdoor opportunities.

March brings us spring, and spring brings us gobbles, fish spawns and exciting action.

That's right, after a winter of deer, duck and dove and a February of rabbit, raccoon and squirrel, March brings us the joy of turkey season and delivers bass and crappie, among other tasty fish, to the shallows.

This issue of *Mississippi Sportsman* is full of information to help you make the transition.

- **Mike Giles** shares hunting tips from turkey calling champion Scott Ellis, with emphasis on successfully introducing a youngster to the mystical sport.
- **David Brown** shares some keys to unlocking the jaws of giant largemouths from the prespawn through the spawn, thanks to bass pros Pete Ponds and Gary Klein.

- **David Hawkins** gives a primer on crappie fishing and then takes us on a tour of the best lakes in the state to find these fish during their transition from pre-spawn to spawn.

- **Dusty Wilson** explains how using side planer boards can help crappie fishermen target shallow fish without spooking them.

- **Phillip Gentry** reminds us that March is a good month to start looking for panfish, too, since one of Mississippi's most sought-after species of bream — the red ear, aka chinquapin and shellcracker — starts bedding in March, months before its popular bluegill and red-belly cousins.

- We also take a look at the **Gulf Coast** and a month of nearshore action for several species, including many that are considered among the best tasting critters in the sea.

There's a lot more, too, on our pages to keep your outdoor juices flowing and help develop a taste for the upcoming action.

Come on, spring. ■

TURKEY SEASON: A MOST PASSIONATE TIME OF YEAR

Turkey hunting isn't as much a sport as it is a passion, or as Mossy Oak labels it, an obsession. No explanation is necessary for those who hunt turkeys; no explanation is possible for those who don't.

"Until you have sat down against a tree at sunrise, listened to the thundering gobbles of a tom down in a hollow, and then matched wits with him for most of the morning, there is no way for me to make you understand what it's like."

Those were the words of the late Boyd Burrow, whose passion for turkey hunting earned him the nicknames "Mr. Turkey" and "Turkey Man" around Mississippi. Burrow was a driving force behind the spread of the National Wild Turkey Federation in the state and in adding many hunters to the list of obsessed. He grew the sport as much as one man could. >

MISSISSIPPI SPRING TURKEY SEASON

SEASONS

Youth only: March 8-March 14. Only hunters aged 15 and under can shoot gobblers, but licensed (or exempt) adults can participate in all other phases of the hunt.

Regular: March 15-May 1.
Limits: One (1) adult gobbler or one gobbler with a 6-inch or longer beard per day, 3 per spring season. Hunters 15 years of age and younger may harvest 1 gobbler of choice (any age, beard length) per day, 3 per spring season.

All because of that feeling Burrow got every time he heard a gobbler.

"It both soothes my soul, yet, at the same time, fires every nerve in my body," he said of the contradiction of satisfaction and excitement felt deep in his body. "There's nothing else like it, anywhere."

Tom Kelly is considered the pre-eminent writer on all things turkey, and he describes a gobbler

thusly: "You are going to find him endlessly fascinating, occasionally easy, regularly difficult, and frequently impossible, but never dull."

Kelly also wrote, "I don't hunt turkeys because I want to; I hunt turkeys because I have to."

Mississippi's spring turkey season opens for children aged 15 and under on March 8, and for all hunters on March 15. The season ends for all hunters on May 1. ■

If there's anything more exciting than a mature gobbler in strut, it's two mature gobblers in strut.



HOW TO SCORE A TURKEY

The National Wild Turkey Federation's formula for scoring a wild gobbler is a combination of weight, spur length and beard length, with multipliers used for emphasis on spur and beard. All measurements are taken in $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch measurements, and lengths and weight must be converted to decimal form.

Step 1: Weigh your bird. If using a decimal scale, enter the weight. If using a scale that measures in pounds and ounces, convert the ounces to decimal form.

Step 2: Measure each spur. Spurs must be measured along the outside center,

from the point at which the spur protrudes from the scaled leg skin to the tip of the spur. Add both spur measurements and multiply the combined length of the spurs by 10. This is the number of points you receive for the turkey's spurs.

Step 3: Measure the beard length — the beard must be measured from the center point of the protrusion of the skin to the tip — and convert it to decimal form. Next, multiply the beard length figure by 2; this is the number of points you receive for the beard length. If you have an atypical bird (multiple beards), measure each beard, convert them to a decimal number,



then add those figures together and multiply by two. This is the number of points you receive for your turkey's beards.

Step 4: Add together the weight, the points for spurs and points for beard(s). The result is the score you receive for your turkey. ■

MAGNOLIA MONARCHS: STATE'S TOP GOBBLERS

Mississippi's Magnolia Records program tracks turkey hunting records in the state and has a database that includes hundreds of birds taken by hunters within its borders.

The information is available by visiting the MDWFP online at <https://xnet2.mdwfp.com/applications/Turkey/magnoliaRecords.aspx>.

Once on the site, viewers can search the database by many methods: by hunter name; typical turkey (single beard); non-typical (multiple beards); beard length; weight; and spur.

Here are some of the top birds:

Longest beard: 17.25 inches, killed by Monty Roberts, April 30, 2001, in Monroe County. The bird had 1-inch spurs on each

leg and weighed 16.75 pounds for a total score of 71.25 typical. Oddly enough, Roberts also ranks No. 3 in beard with a 16-incher killed the next season, also in Monroe County. That bird had 1.19-inch spurs on each leg, weighed 19.77 pounds. The second bird produced a higher total typical score of 75.57. Neither ranks in the top 10 of typical birds in Mississippi.

Total beard length (non-typical): 60.25 inches. On a hunt in Pontotoc County on April 8, 2010, Don Shumaker killed a gobbler with nine beards. The longest was 10.75 inches, followed by measurements of 8, 5.75, 7.5, 7, 6.25, 5.25, 5 and 4.75. The bird weighed 19.06 pounds and, oddly enough, had spurs of less than an inch on each leg. Mississippi's other top five total lengths are 57.25, 53.26, 52.86 and 52.7.

Longest spur: 1.88 inches. Killed by Don Marascalco on April 16, 2007, in Lauderdale County, this turkey had its longest of two giant spurs on its left leg. The spur on the right leg was just a measly little ol' 1.75 inches, which would tie it for sixth place, giving it a total of 3.63 inches of spur. James Ellis' bird killed in 2015 in Rankin County is tied for second for longest spur with 1.875, but ranks first in total spur length with 3.75 inches. Both of Ellis' spurs were 1.875 inches.

Heaviest: 26.25 pounds. Hunting in Rankin County on March 19, 2015, David Evans killed the heaviest turkey ever taken in Mississippi, beating by nearly a pound the old record of 25.27 killed in 2009 by Laura Kay Russell in Panola County. Later in 2015, Russell's bird was dropped to No.



Hunting/Fishing **SCRAPBOOK**



Cooper Mizell, 7, with his first deer killed on Dec. 15, 2017 in Natchez.



Bailey LeBlanc poses with the 200-pound 8-pointer she killed this season. Its main beam was 24 inches and inside spread was 17.



Dave Williamson killed this cull buck on Jan. 20 while hunting around Hazlehurst. It weighed 155 pounds.

3 when Daniel Favazza killed a 25.61-pound bird in Marshall County. Surprisingly, the top seven heavyweights were all typical birds.

Total score, typical: 80.64. Amp Frith holds the Magnolia Record for best single-beard, or typical turkey for a gobbler he killed on April 8, 2005, in Smith County. His bird serves as a prime example of the emphasis placed on spur and beard length over weight — at 19.94 pounds, Frith's turkey is the lightest in the top 8 typical birds.

Total score, non-typical: 157.06. Shumaker's 9-bearded bird ranks as the No. 1 non-typical by 5.5 points. Jerreld Keele is second at 151.16 for a 2008 bird killed in Tishomingo County. With the spurs of a 2-year-old gobbler, both less than an inch, and a moderate weight of 19.06 pounds, Shumaker's record was built primarily on the 60.25 inches of total beard length. ■



Sam Norris, III, 12, of Saint Simons Island, Ga., was hunting in Monroe County on Nov. 22 when he killed this 13-point buck that scored 149. He was hunting with his father and grandfather.



John Paul Parker of Oxford killed this nice buck while hunting with his dad on Dec. 9.



On Dec. 17, Morgan Beard harvested the buck of a lifetime in Chickasaw County. She took a non-typical 9-point with triple main beams using her H&R .45-70. Weighing in at 175 pounds. This approximately 4-year-old deer green scored 125 1/2.

GOT PICS?
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BASSMASTER OPEN AT BARNETT

In a March 2015 Bassmaster Central Open on Ross Barnett, Gene Bishop of Ridgeland found big female bass on a prespawn pattern to post a victory. He'll try to repeat March 1-3 on Barnett Reservoir.

Bobby Cleveland

For the fourth time in six years, and the 13th time in its history, the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (BASS) is bringing one of its national tournaments to Barnett Reservoir this month.

The Bassmaster Open Central Division kicks off with a three-day event March 1-3 on the 33,000-acre lake out of Madison Landing in Ridgeland.

BASS has held Opens on Barnett in 2013 and 2015, and it brought its premier Elite Series to Barnett in 2017.

Why so often, you might ask? There are many reasons, not the least of which is an active Ridgeland Tourism Commission that actively pursues BASS events for the economic impact they bring.

The Jackson metro market is important to BASS, too, since it is home to a Bass Pro

Shops store in Pearl. BPS is the national sponsor of the Bassmaster Open series, and it likes to stage the final day's weigh-in at the store. Having a Bass Pro Shops nearby gives the market a step up on many other popular bass-fishing destinations.

It is also important to BASS tradition. The original idea of BASS was conceived in the mind of founder Ray Scott of Montgomery, Ala., on a fishing/business trip to Jackson in 1967, two years after Barnett Reservoir was impounded. The fishing trip with friends was rained out, but back in the hotel over a room-service hamburger, with a football game on television, Scott envisioned a grass-roots fishing organization that a year later became the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society.

Scott brought tournaments to Barnett

often in the early years, from 1968 to 1973, and he brought the sport's main event, the Bassmaster Classic to Barnett in 1978.

It wasn't until the 2015 Central Open that a Mississippian won a BASS tournament on Barnett. Gene Bishop, who lives less than a mile from the reservoir in Ridgeland, broke through with a victory in March. The timing is not lost on Bishop.

"That tournament was in March, but later in the month," Bishop said. "This year it will be earlier, and that will make a big difference in bass behavior. We have a certain water temperature at which the big females move shallow. It happened late on the first day (of the 2015 event) and I didn't realize it until it was too late that day, but I was ready the next day."

Boy was he. After catching less than 9 pounds on Day 1, Bishop caught 26

REZ FISHERIES UPDATE MARCH 8 AT BASS PRO

pounds, 1 ounce on Day 2 to surge into the lead. He then slammed the door on the third and final day with 21 pounds to win going away.

"Swimming a lizard in the pad stems, just like everybody on Barnett does in the spring," Bishop said after being crowned champion.

Was that a mistake, telling the secret, now that another March event is coming to the lake?

"Not really, no," he said. "It's no secret that it's what we do here, plus, I don't know if it will be as effective on big fish. You will be able to catch smaller males shallow in the stems, but March 1-3 is usually too early for the big females.

About 250 pro anglers will compete in the event, paired with a different amateur "co-angler" each day, with over \$275,000 in cash and prizes to be awarded.

After launching at the Madison Landing, each day will start in Main Harbor, with checkout to begin around 6 a.m. at Pelican's Cove and the Main Harbor Store. Check-ins will begin around 3 p.m. at Madison Landing, with Thursday's and Friday's weigh-ins conducted at the Landing. Only the top 12 boats will compete on Saturday, and will be trailered to Bass Pro Shops in Pearl for the final weigh-in.

The Madison Landing ramp will be closed to public use on Thursday and Friday, March 1-2 to accommodate tournament boats, but will be open to the public March 3 after Saturday's tournament launch. ■

The Pearl River Valley Water Supply District, the state agency that oversees Barnett Reservoir, and the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks will hold their annual fisheries update at 6 p.m. Thursday, March 8, at Bass Pro Shops in Pearl.

This will be the fourth year of the meetings for bass anglers, but the first to add a crappie update to the agenda and a first to be held away from the lake.

"We urge all interested Barnett Reservoir bass

and crappie fishermen to attend the meeting to get the latest biological information from MDWFP, the latest update on facilities, and, most importantly, to give us your feedback," said John Sigman, executive director for PRWSD.

"This exchange of information is important to us, especially hearing the public's thoughts on the issues that matter most to them."

Admission is free to the public. For more information, email bobbyc7754@yahoo.com. ■

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CAPITOL REPORT: **HARVEST-REPORT SYSTEM SEEMS LIKELY TO PASS**

Mississippi deer and turkey hunters could soon be required to report any kills to the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, if a bill passed by the House gets through the Senate and is signed by the governor.

But the interesting thing about H.B. 1390 is not what it includes but what it does not — no mention of using the program for enforcement of bag limits.

What it says: “The MDWFP shall develop, implement and regulate a mandatory harvest-reporting program for white-tailed deer or wild turkey or both. The purpose of this program is to collect and compile harvest data of such quality and quantity as to be able to assist the Legislature and the Commission in formulating the wildlife resource conservation policy for the State of Mississippi.”

The bill does include a section that reads “each deer or turkey taken or possessed in violation of the harvest reporting system is a separate offense,” but no direct mention of using the system to enforce bag limits is included in the version passed by the House. The original language, as authored and introduced by Scott Bounds, chairman of the House Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks Committee, and co-author Ken Morgan, did include the line “monitor bag-limit compliance by any means,” but it was stricken before the committee vote.

The bill requires that: “The harvest-reporting program shall be simple to use by sportsmen, so as to promote compliance and accurate reporting. The program may include, but is not limited to, such means as a mobile smart-phone application, online web-based reporting, or such other electronic or digital method(s) as will promote ease of use.”

There is a line that forbids the use of appropriated funds to implement a tagging system.

On the same day the House passed 1390, the Senate tabled its version of the same bill, S.B. 2922. The Senate version is extremely similar to the House version,

with the only differences being the Senate included a 72-hour reporting requirement from the time of the kill and excluded deer killed on private lands that take part in the MDWFP’s Deer Management Assistance Program.

The Senate bill had passed its committee, showing at least partial support for implementing a harvest report system.

Of the 15 bills assigned to the House Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks Committee, 12 died in committee.

A bill addressing the use of thermal imaging or heat amplifying devices in deer hunting passed the committee but was tabled before the full house could vote.

A bill that would require owners of deer enclosures to apply for and receive a permit from the MDWFP passed the House and was sent to the Senate.

Of the 21 bills presented the Senate Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks Committee, 16 died in committee. The Senate tabled the harvest-reporting system, and, at the time of this reporting was still considering five measures.

The most significant is S.B. 2678 that would regulate freshwater fishing guides. Guides would have to apply for and obtain annual permits from the MDWFP and meet certain requirements.

Other Senate bills still being considered included identifying existing and needed wildlife corridors, exempting veterans with service-related disabilities from State Park fees, and requiring permits for deer enclosures. ■



A bill in the state Legislature could create a harvest reporting system in Mississippi for deer and turkey beginning in 2019.

Bobby Cleveland

GULF RED SNAPPER SEASON STILL NOT SET FOR 2018

Recreational red snapper fishermen will likely learn this month or in April the extent of the season in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico, but the opening apparently will remain June 1.

According to the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council website, the season on red snapper had yet to be set on Feb. 1, other than it would open on June 1 and would close when annual catch limits are projected to be met.

"That's just more bull from the feds," said James Thurmond of Biloxi. "Last year, they first said they would give us three days, three measly days — June 1-3. Later, they added a lot more days (39) on weekends in the summer, but that worries me now. What's to stop them from coming back this year and saying, 'Hey we gave you 42 last year, and y'all kept too many fish. This year, we give you June 1, and that's it?'"

"Think I'm crazy? Look, what's to stop them from coming back and getting even with the recreational sector for the push-back we have them last year. They gave us three days last year until the five Gulf States fought back. I don't like the system. I don't trust the agency, and I certainly don't trust the commercial fishing side of this whole deal."

In the meantime, the season on greater

amberjack is closed through July 1. The triggerfish season opens March 1 and will remain open through July 31.

"But look at the limit on triggerfish, it's one per person," Thurmond said. "Are you

The 2018 Mississippi and federal Gulf of Mexico red snapper seasons have not been set, but the offshore season will start on June 1.



Bobby Cleveland

kidding me; one triggerfish per day per person? And they wonder why we don't trust them." ■

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TEEN TAKES 185-INCH CACTUS BUCK

CARPENTER'S 18-POINT LEFLORE COUNTY ODDITY WAS STILL IN VELVET ON JAN. 13

By Bobby Cleveland

Asked to describe his massive, 18-point, 185-inch buck killed Jan. 13 in the Mississippi Delta, 15-year-old Ross Carpenter didn't use words like "trophy" or "beautiful" or anything like that.

No, he went another direction, the obvious way, choosing a true description.

"It's weird," said Carpenter, a 10th-grader at Pillow Academy, who paused a bit before adding, "He didn't have testicles."

Carpenter's is one of those odd deer called a "cactus buck" — the nickname given to a buck that lacks the testosterone to allow it to cycle through the normal phases of antler growth. The malady could be caused by a birth defect or an injury.

Instead of growing and shedding antlers annually, a cactus buck keeps the same set, usually covered in hard, mossy-looking velvet. In many respects, the hardware on its head become less like antlers and more like the horns — which are never shed — on a goat or a bull.

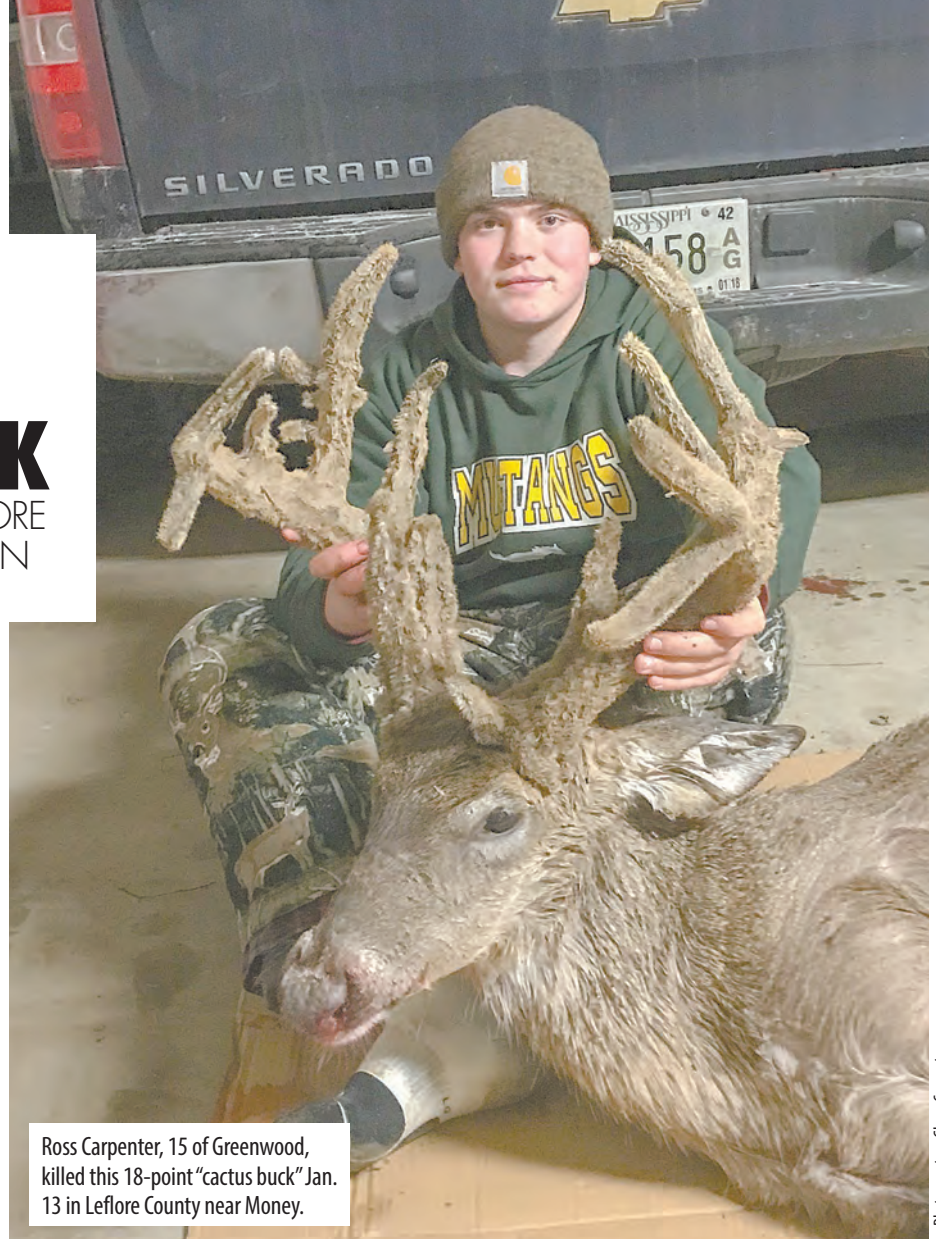
They just get bigger, and thicker, and, in most cases, very gnarly.

Carpenter's buck did all of those.

The deer had massive bases, 8 inches in circumference on one side and 7 on the other. The circumferences between the brow tines and the first large tines were both 6½ inches.

Gnarly? Yes, it had oddities, like two impressive drop tines. The right brow tine was split in two, with both points measuring about 5 inches. The right G3 had three sticker points. There is an assortment of odd bumps and notches, big and little, or as Ross Carpenter said, "a bunch more stickers and stuff."

Carpenter was hunting with his dad, Glenn Carpenter, on a farm he owns near Money in Leflore County.



Ross Carpenter, 15 of Greenwood, killed this 18-point "cactus buck" Jan. 13 in Leflore County near Money.

Photo courtesy Glenn Carpenter

"We think it's a main-frame 10-point," Glenn Carpenter said. "We had the taxidermist measure him, and he came up with a 185-inch gross score."

Unburdened by the desire to procreate, cactus bucks don't chase does, make scrapes or rub on trees.

"Apparently," Ross Carpenter said, "they just like to eat and sleep."

Which, of course, allows them to get big.

"We didn't weigh him, but I figure he weighed at least 250 pounds, I know Dad and I couldn't get him on the 4-wheeler."

It was Glenn Carpenter who first discovered the oddity.

"I didn't find (a scrotum) when I field dressed him," he said. "I did find these little hard things in that channel (leading to the usual male parts). I guess those could have been his testicles, but I also noticed that he was missing part of its tail, so I guess it could have been an accident that left him that way.

"One of the first things I noticed was that it still had his velvet, but it wasn't like normal velvet you see on a deer. It was harder and stiffer, kind of like it was shrink-wrapped on the antler. I'd never seen that. We also hunt some on some private land in Carroll County, in the hills, and I saw a buck there around Thanksgiving still in velvet, but it wasn't the same thing. That's a month later than usual, but it looked like normal velvet."

Ross Carpenter has had great mentorship in hunting, through his dad, a dyed-in-the-wool deer hunter, and his grandfather, who loves duck hunting.

"Ross, he just likes to hunt it all," Glenn Carpenter said.

Ross Carpenter has the best of both worlds, his dad said, often hunting ducks in the morning and deer in the afternoon. The area in which he killed the buck, oddly enough, was right next to the family's duck hole, where they had shared a

limit-out duck hunt just two days earlier.

"I guess I got to the stand between 2:30 and 3 o'clock," he said. "It was cold, in the 20s. It was cold enough that some of the water was frozen. It was breezy, probably 7 to 8 miles per hour and in my favor."

Despite being adjacent to the duck hole, where shotgun blasts had been numerous since the hole had filled with water and ducks, the Carpenters felt the buck could still be in the area.

"We had pictures of him Dec. 28, 29 and 30, in that area," Ross Carpenter said. "My dad thought he saw him in June, in velvet, which would be normal, in our food plot in June."

"In June, I noticed he was already big, heavy-horned, like a 150-inch deer, which is odd that time of year," Glenn Carpenter said. "They usually don't get that big until a month or two later."

The Carpenters had established the odd buck's home area.

"We had a pretty good idea where he would be," Ross Carpenter said. "After we got the pictures in December, the next time we checked the camera was Jan. 9, and he was pretty much nocturnal, but we had one picture of him at 5 o'clock."

Ross said he thinks he may have jumped the buck on a trip to check the duck hole.

"I saw a big heavy deer, and that's all I could tell," he said.

With that data at hand, he chose to hunt the stand near the duck hole. For about 90 minutes, the afternoon was uneventful.

"I had seen a bunch of ducks come into the duck hole, about 200 yards away from my stand," Ross Carpenter said. "I hadn't seen anything else, until I looked around and thought I saw a doe. Then I looked closer and I saw it was two deer. I looked at one, and it was a doe. Then I looked at the other, and it was him."

The deer were about 60 to 70 yards away, on the other side of a ditch that had overflow from where the duck hole had backed up.

"They were walking along that water, looking for a place to cross, coming toward me," Ross Carpenter said. "I'd get glimpses of them as they walked toward me. He wasn't paying attention to her; actually, she was following him instead of what you'd expect

from a normal buck.

"At 40 yards, he crossed and walked into an opening and gave me a shot. I hit him dead center of the shoulder, with him angling toward me. He bolted and went about 30 yards, and ran into a tree and fell over dead. It was 4:51"

Where the buck hit the tree was the only damage to the velvet on the odd antlers.

"I pulled the jawbone, and the biologist said he was 4½," Glenn Carpenter said. "I did a ride-along with the biologist who wanted to ride around the Carroll County place, which is on the DMAP program. I told him about Ross' buck, and he told me about deer with testicular problems. First I'd heard about it.

"I told Ross that his buck is a trophy in so many ways, and to enjoy it because the odds against him ever seeing another one like it are pretty long. He may kill bucks that score higher, but he probably won't see anything like that one again." ■

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Photo courtesy Cameron Stigler

SEASON'S LAST DAY IS ONE TO REMEMBER FOR 7-YEAR-OLD

SECOND-GRADER KILLS DOE, ADDS 10-POINT, 146-INCH TROPHY BUCK ON JAN. 31

By Bobby Cleveland

On Jan. 31, the final day of deer season in much of Mississippi, Cameron Stigler of Florence took his 7-year-old daughter, Presleigh, to the woods for a last shot at avoiding a shutout season.

The goal: Get the “veteran” hunter a shot at a doe.

The outcome: A trip the father and daughter will never forget.

Presleigh Stigler not only got her doe, but an hour later, she closed the season with a 10-point, 146-inch buck.

“It was an afternoon that will live forever in the hearts of her family and friends,” Cameron Stigler said.

Presleigh Stigler is no stranger to the outdoors or deer stands; it was natural for her to gravitate in that direction. Her father is an avid outdoorsman who manages The Outfitter, a hunting/fishing store on U.S. 49 in Richland. They have hunted deer, dove,

hogs and squirrel together.

“She has been outside since before she could walk and loving every minute of it,” Cameron Stigler said. “Presleigh squeezed the trigger on her very first deer at age 3 — with me holding the gun and aiming for her — and we were accompanied by her mother, Jenny.

“She did it again at age 5, on a nice 9-point with me holding the gun. This year, it was time for her to shoot by herself.”

But, as it happens, life got in the way.

“She’s been focused on school and helping her mother with her two younger brothers, so she hasn’t had a lot of times in the woods this season,” her dad said. “As a matter of fact, this was only her second hunt of the season, and it was on the last day.”

Cameron Stigler checked his second-grader out of Steen’s Creek Lower

Presleigh Stigler, 7, of Florence, killed two deer on Jan. 31, the final day of the season, including this 146-inch 10-point. A doe and that buck were the first two deer she’s taken without help holding the gun.

Elementary School early that Wednesday, and the two headed west to take advantage of a friend’s invite to hunt in Hinds County.

Before going to the stand, Cameron Stigler had Presleigh practice shooting her older brother’s .308 Handi Rifle, breathing and squeezing the trigger, dry-firing the firearm repeatedly.

“She grew up shooting .22s from the time she could walk, so shooting was just a normal thing to her,” Cameron Stigler said. “But she had only shot this gun once before that afternoon.

“We got on the stand around 3:45 after a 200-yard walk and were on doe patrol unless we saw a shoulder-mount quality buck. After several phone games, as well as regular comments like ‘Daddy, I’m bored,’ ‘Daddy, I’m hungry,’ ‘Daddy, I’m tired,’ and ‘Daddy, I’m bored,’ we saw our first deer of the afternoon.”

It was a nice, healthy doe, followed by a 3½-year-old 8-pointer with palmated antlers. Presleigh spotted the buck right off, but her dad held her off the immature buck and started getting her in line with the doe.

"Around 4:30, she made the perfect shot, and the doe exited the field right into the wood line," Cameron Stigler said. "We celebrated and reviewed the self video. With tears in her eyes, she said, 'Daddy I got her, and all by myself.'"

Cameron Stigler calmed his impatient daughter, who wanted to go get her doe loaded. There was more time, "Daddy's time on the trigger," he said.

But, as it also happens, things change and roles reverse, and dad gives way to the daughter.

"Right around 5:30, I heard Presleigh whisper, 'Daddy there's a big buck,'" Cameron Stigler said. "I was glassing one way, and she was looking out my side and saw it. I immediately started shaking."

Meanwhile, Presleigh remained calm and started getting ready to take a shot, but it became hectic with so much to do.

"Her ear muffs were tangled in her hair," Cameron Stigler said.

"The buck was zig-zagging, nose to the ground, at a steady trot, and we needed to switch seats. I didn't think we were going to have enough time, as fast as he was going and all the problems we were having, but finally she had her hearing protection on and the gun out the window. She whispered, 'I'm ready Daddy.'"

The shot rang out, and the buck left the field in a hurry.

"I thought she hit him a little far back, and all I was thinking was 'Chris Pena's going to be too busy tonight to find my baby's deer. That was what was going through my head,'" Cameron Stigler said, referring to a man who has some of the best blood-trailing dogs in Mississippi.

Fortunately, Pena's assistance wasn't required.

The Stiglers found the doe quickly; it had only made it a few feet past the wood line.

"By then, my friend, Daniel Dantoni, arrived to help," Cameron Stigler said. "I told him I had loaded the doe and that the buck is that way. Daniel's eyes got a little worry in them, hoping that the buck was big enough to be a shooter on the property."

As the two men went to trail the buck, Presleigh got in the truck.

"I was worried about the shot but shouldn't have been," Cameron Stigler said. "I thought she had shot too far back, but it was a perfect double-lung shot. The buck had only gone 75 yards, and we found it pretty quick."

"As Daniel and I pulled (the buck) out of the woods, the truck door opened, her jaw dropped, and a little squeal could be heard throughout the woods."

Presleigh, who had made two perfect 80-yard shots with her brother's gun, flew out of the truck and grabbed the giant buck. She was grinning ear to ear.

"She said, 'This one is going on the wall,' and I told her it sure was and would be there for us to enjoy for years to come," Cameron Stigler said. "Then she said, 'But what will my boyfriends think when they come over and see it? What if it's bigger than any thing they've ever killed?'"

"I laughed, and said, 'I wouldn't be worried about that. You aren't going to have any boyfriends until you're at least 20.'" ■



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BRANDON YOUNGSTER REALLY HAS TO WAIT ON FIRST BUCK BUCK

FOURTH-GRADER DRILLS 7-POINTER; BUCK FOUND LATER, BURIED IN LEAVES BY BOBCAT

By Bobby Cleveland

Aubrey Dale had hunted all season to get her first buck, joining her father in the deer stand whenever she could, showing more patience than one would expect of a 10-year-old.

It paid off on the final Sunday of the season, Jan. 28, when she killed her first antlered buck, a mature 7-point her dad had wanting killed — and one that a bobcat tried to steal. More on that later.

"That was a great finish to January," said Corey Dale, who sells commercial insurance in Brandon. "She's a fourth-grader at Brandon Elementary and earlier had been named the student of the month for January. It was a great month for her."

Aubrey Dale is an avid hunter who Corey Dale calls "a true daddy's girl."

She killed her first deer, a doe, when she was just seven, but she hadn't shot another one since.

"She loves it, she really does, and she wants to go whenever she can," Corey Dale said. "Any time she sees me about to leave to go deer hunting, man, she's up and ready to go. We pack food and stuff and just have a good time."

"Ever since she killed that doe, she's passed on does and spikes, waiting on a buck. I think she kind of got tender about does, since she spined that first one and we had to make a second, finishing shot."

This year, the Dales had made eight trips together without an opportunity for Aubrey to shoot a buck. On Jan. 28, her

last chance, they went to a roomy elevated shooting house overlooking a food plot on a long power-line right-of-way.

"I was hoping she'd get a shot at the 7-point," Corey Dale said. "We'd gotten a lot of pictures of him for three months but never saw him while hunting. He was on our shooter list, a mature 7-point with a big body. He weighed 175 pounds, and that was after the rut."

"We got in the stand about 3:15, and it didn't take long for deer to appear. We had about 10 or 12 does, yearlings and a couple of cow-horn spikes in the food plot, but she wasn't interested. She kept saying she wanted a rack buck."

Hours passed, and the sun was fading fast, not only on the afternoon but Aubrey's hunting season.

"About 5:30, he walked out in the power line about 250 yards away from us and started walking toward us," Corey Dale said. "It took a while, and it seemed like forever, for the buck to close 150 yards to get within 100 yards. That gave us time to go through our game plan, with me reminding her where to put the crosshairs, how to breathe and how to squeeze the trigger."

Finally, the deer was in range, and they waited for it to present a broadside shot.

"We were rapidly running out of time," Corey Dale said. "She was watching him in her scope, waiting for a shot, and I was panicking about the time."

The two cow-horn spikes chasing the does didn't help, either.

"They kept pushing deer between her and the buck, and we had to wait for them to get clear," Corey Dale said. "We only had a few minutes left when finally she got the chance."

Aubrey Dale had the buck's vital areas squarely in the scope of the .308 rifle, fitted with a suppressor to lessen the recoil.

Boom!

"She's always been a good shot, and I am completely comfortable being off the side and letting her do it herself," Corey Dale said. "That way, I could glass the buck with my binoculars and watch for the deer's reaction to the shot. He bucked real good, so I knew she'd hit him hard. He ran out of the power line into the woods."

But when they descended and went to check for blood, they found just three or four drops of blood.

"That surprised me," Corey Dale said. "We trailed a little bit and couldn't find any, so I decided to pull out and call Chris Pena, who is on that Facebook site called 'Nose to the Ground Blood Trail' and he said he could come up on Monday morning and meet me."

The drive home was excruciating for both dad and daughter.

"I kept telling her that she'd done everything right, and it was OK, and I'd even resigned to start saying, 'We'll get them next year,'" he said. "She didn't have much to say."

On Monday, Aubrey went to school while Corey made the drive back to



Corey Dale and his daughter Aubrey Dale with the 10-year-old's first buck, a mature 7-point killed on her final hunt of the season.

Photo courtesy Corey Dale

Holmes County to the family property to meet Pena.

"He put the dogs' noses on the blood, and they went off, and in a matter of seconds they were barking like they had bayed the buck," Dale said. "But when he went in to the dogs, he couldn't find anything. He brought them back out, put them back on the blood and sent them back in. They returned to the exact same spot and started barking. When he got in there this time, he didn't see anything, but he went to where they were barking and looked and found the buck completely buried in leaves.

"Apparently, a bobcat had found the buck overnight and had eaten some of the guts and then completely covered it up with leaves to hide it from other predators. Chris said he's seen it before."

With temperatures in the 50s overnight and in the 60s both days, the meat was ruined, but the antlers were saved. The shot had been perfect, hitting right behind the shoulder and getting a clear pass through. Yet there was little blood to be found.

"I field dressed it, and took it and cleaned it up real good and put it in the back of the truck, covering it with a lot of old burlaps bags," Dale said. "When I went to pick her up that afternoon at school, she came running out and asked, 'Did you find my buck? Did you find him?'"

"I said, 'No, but I did find something you'll want to see.' With that she went to the back of the truck, pulled back the burlap and let out a scream so loud and then jumped up and down squealing. Partner, that right there made it all worthwhile." ■

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TURKEY FORECAST: SIMILAR TO 2017

By Bobby Cleveland

Kyle Cleaman

EAST CENTRAL, NORTHEAST BEST; DELTA 'NOT GOOD AT ALL'

Mississippi turkey hunters who had a good season last spring will enjoy the forecast for the 2018 season, but those who did not will not be so enthusiastic.

And, hunters in the Delta, well they won't like it all.

"I expect the 2018 season, on average, to probably be a pretty close replay of the 2017 season," said biologist Adam Butler, the wild-turkey program leader for the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks.

He said Mississippi hunters harvested an estimated 27,500 gobblers last spring.

"The 2016 brood survey yielded very similar results as the 2015 survey, so the size of the 2-year-old cohort this year should be pretty similar to last year," said Butler, noting that it is the more gullible young gobblers that are the easiest to fool with a call. "Also, statewide jake observations from the (2017) Spring Gobbler Hunting Survey have been pretty similar for the last three springs."

The forecast varies through the five regions used by the MDWFP. Here is his regional breakdown for 2018:

NORTHEAST

"Similar, though maybe down slightly from last year. The Northeast was last year's hot spot and had the Spring Gobbler Survey's highest harvest per time spent hunting — 3.7 gobblers harvested per 100 hours hunted. Post-season gobbler carryover seemed strong, and 2016 brood survey results along with 2017 jake observations all suggest very good hunting in the Northeast for 2018."

EAST CENTRAL

"This region will likely be this year's hot spot. Based on the 2016 hatch, and 2017 jake observations, I expect a big 2-year-old crop in Central Mississippi."

THE DELTA

"Not good at all. The flood patterns over the last decade have been terrible for the Delta; the last good hatch was 2014, and

those birds have probably mostly played out. The hatches since then have not been sufficient to increase or even maintain populations."

SOUTHWEST

"Southwest should offer slightly better hunting than last year — not necessarily a stellar season by Southwest standards, but still pretty solid. Gobbler carryover from 2017 appeared well above-average for the region, so hunters should encounter a higher proportion of older birds. This may mean there will be plenty of gobbler interactions, but harvests may be fewer since older birds are stubborn."

SOUTHEAST

"It'll be pretty similar to last year, which means tough hunting. Recent reproduction hasn't been sufficient to boost numbers to what hunters remember 10 to 15 years ago. The good news is that parts of the region appeared to have had a decent hatch, so there may be light at the end of the tunnel." ■

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DEER FEEDING BANNED IN 6 COUNTIES DUE TO CWD

By Bobby Cleveland

MISSISSIPPI'S FIRST CASE OF FATAL DEER DISEASE CONFIRMED IN ISSAQUENA COUNTY IN EARLY FEBRUARY

Supplemental feeding of deer was suspended on Feb. 9 in six west-central counties of Mississippi after a lab in Iowa confirmed the Magnolia State's first case of chronic wasting disease (CWD) in a free-range buck from Issaquena County.

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks immediately implemented its CWD Response Plan under the auspices of the Commission on Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks.

Pursuant to the Order of the Executive Director on behalf of the Commission, supplemental feeding was banned in Claiborne, Hinds, Issaquena, Sharkey, Warren, and Yazoo counties.

No feeding of deer, including through mechanized feeders, is allowed in any fashion. Baiting hogs will continue to be allowed, but with much tighter restrictions.

"Baiting for the trapping of wild hogs will only be allowed when the corn or other grain is placed within the confines of the trap," said Russ Walsh, MDWFP's chief of wildlife. "And anyone in those six counties operating a hog trap will have to have the trap permitted through the agency. We don't want to dissuade anyone in their attempts to control wild hogs, but we must take the steps necessary to prevent the spread of CWD."

Amy Blaylock, assistant chief of wildlife, said on Feb. 12 that the ban on supplemental deer feeding in the six-county area is just the first step in a fluid MDWFP response plan for CWD.

"We are now formulating an effort to collect more samples of deer within the 5-mile containment zone around the site where the deer with CWD was found," she

said. "We will test them to see how prevalent the disease is in the 5-mile area and then decide from there whether we need to expand the sampling into the 10-mile range and beyond.

"One thing that is promising is that the area where this was found is the most-tested area of the state. We have sampled more deer from there than anywhere else, and until Friday, we haven't had a positive test."

There is no CWD testing facility in Mississippi.

"Right now, there are two that most states use: one in Iowa where we sent this one, and one in Colorado," Blaylock said.

"There are two tests for CWD, and it costs about \$60 per animal for both tests; it takes about two weeks to get the results."

Mississippi is the 25th state with a confirmed case of CWD, another fact that works to its advantage.

"We're not the first state to have to fight CWD, and we have the advantage of seeing what other states have done to learn from their responses," Walsh said.

"Arkansas just confirmed its case in the northwest part of the state in 2016," Blaylock said. "and when they did their sampling, they found enough positive tests to know they had had CWD for probably 10 years, but just didn't have any confirmation. We've watched them closely."

Blaylock said the agency first received notice of the buck on Jan. 25.

"We got the call that a 4½-year-old, free-range buck was found dead in a food plot," she said. "As I understand it, a hunter had seen the buck a few times in the preceding days, and it appeared to be acting sick, or strange. Then, two days later, he found it dead in the food plot.



Mississippi's first case of a CWD-infected deer was confirmed Feb. 9 when an Iowa laboratory completed its tests on a free-range mature buck found dead Jan. 25 in Issaquena County.

The buck weighed just 96 pounds, was terribly emaciated and had died from pneumonia. Pneumonia was the official cause of death."

Blaylock said the pneumonia was likely the result of the deer's poor health, caused by the CWD.

CWD was first documented among captive mule deer in Colorado in 1967 and has been confirmed now in 25 states, three Canadian provinces, and two foreign countries.

According to the Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance, CWD affects a deer's nervous system. Once in the host's body, prions transform normal cellular protein into an abnormal shape that accumulates until the cell ceases to function. Infected animals begin to lose weight, lose their appetite and develop an insatiable thirst. They tend to stay away from herds, walk in patterns, carry their head low, salivate and grind their teeth. CWD has a 100-percent fatality rate; deer that are infected will die.

Anyone seeing a deer acting strangely and showing any of those symptoms should notify the MDWFP immediately at 800-BE-SMART.

Jeff Terry of Eagle Lake lives just outside the 5-mile containment zone on about 1,000 acres of property he leases to farmers. He hunts for recreation and is concerned about the impact of CWD being found so close.

"Yes, it causes some worry and fear," said Terry, a former guide at nearby Tara Wildlife. "We've seen some sick deer; we see them all the time. Usually, when we shoot them, we find that the animal has suffered some sort of injury — like being shot with a gun or bow — or has incurred

another kind of injury like a broken leg or deep gash.

"But there have been some that we don't know what was involved, so, yes, I have to worry that it could have been CWD, but that's just one of many things that concerns me about CWD. This could be an economic disaster over here. There are a lot of landowners, stores and other businesses here that would be horribly impacted if the outbreak is big. We've got stores and other types of businesses over here that depend on the money deer hunters spend each season. For many, I bet it's half their annual business income, if not more."

Terry said large landowners depend on recreational land leases for income, "but who wants to lease land where CWD is found and you are afraid to eat the meat. A lot of sportsmen won't kill anything they can't eat. There are some who would kill just for the trophy racks, but I doubt it's enough to sustain the industry."

Terry hopes the MDWFP will remain open with the public and keep it informed about the response.

"We do plan to have a public meeting or meetings over there, in that area, at some point," Blaylock said. "That is on our response-plan list. But right now, we are in the formative stages in our response plan, and the response will be impacted by what happens in each stage. It will be fluid in that respect."

For example, whether or not the sampling of deer — which can only be conducted on dead animals — needs to expand outside the 5-mile containment zone will depend on the percentage of positive tests found within the 5-mile zone.

Walsh said it's not time to panic, but one to take steps to learn the extent of CWD's spread, if any, and to prevent it from spreading. While feeding may or may not have contributed to this animal's illness, it could hasten the spread of infection by concentrating deer around a food source.

"Food plots are not included

in the ban; because of their size they don't concentrate deer nearly as much," Walsh said. "It actually spreads the deer out over a wider area."

CWD is a prion-based disease. Prion is a term derived from proteinacious infectious particle and refers to the pathogen that causes transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs), rare neurodegenerative diseases. It is believed that prions released through bodily excretions from CWD-infected deer can remain infectious for at least 10 years.

"That's what scares me the most," Terry said. "Even if they don't find CWD in the sampling, what can they do? Everywhere that one deer had been, where it ate, drank or pooped, can infect deer four, five

or 10 years from now. I read where deer can have CWD for two years before it shows symptoms, so how many deer are walking around out there already infected that aren't showing the signs of it yet?"

"If they find that a big percentage of the deer test positive, say 25 to 50 percent in a certain area, you know they can't exterminate every deer in that area. It's simply impossible, and I don't care if they line people up shoulder to shoulder and march them through the woods with rifles. They won't get them all. So where does it stop?"

Terry paused, sighed, and added: "There's so much uncertainty so much unknown about CWD, it's just scary." ■

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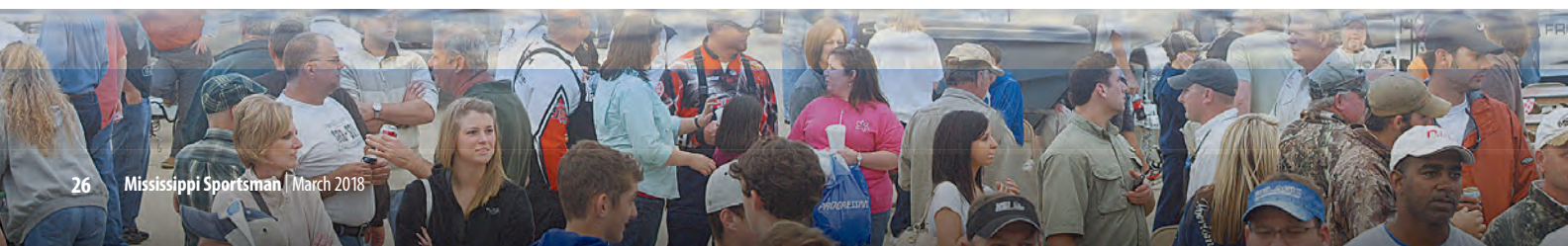


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SLAB-SLACK TIME

SPRING BRINGS CRAPPIE INTO THE SHALLOWS IN LAKES ACROSS MISSISSIPPI. HERE'S A LIST OF GO-TO SPOTS AND GO-TO TACTICS TO FILL YOUR COOLER WITH SLABS AND YOUR FREEZER WITH FILLETS.

By David Hawkins



Don Kibler

AMMIN'



Every spring, an eons-old phenomenon takes place in the lakes and streams in southeastern states. The waters warm, crappie move shallow and become active, and fishermen rejoice. They reap the bounty brought on by the predictable behavior of the fair-fleshed fish.

That behavior not only fills fishermen's coolers — even freezers — but also produces a new year-class of crappie to replace those caught on a hook, making sure the cycle is unbroken.

While there is a solid argument that bass are the most-popular fish in the Magnolia State, crappie — at least in the spring — have a solid edge in popularity.

A SLAB PRIMER

Crappie are a river and stream fish that have adapted well to lake environments. While they can rapidly over-populate a small lake when key predators cannot control the population naturally, they flourish in reservoirs and river systems.

Two species are common in Mississippi, white and black crappie; the two can cross and create what is called a calico crappie. They can also be caught in the same schools and enter the spawning period at the same time.

Biologists with the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks developed a solution to the problem of small-lake over-proliferation by developing the "Magnolia crappie," a sterile hybrid of black and white crappie.

Crappie spawn annually in the spring. When waters warm to around 60 degrees, male fish move into shallow spawning areas and create "beds" around either grass or hard structure to attract later-arriving females.

During the prespawn, females stage near deep water, waiting until their eggs are fully developed. Then, they move shallow to find a partner and start depositing eggs. It may require several trips in and out to expel all their eggs, usually between 30,000 and 150,000 per fish.



Grass and brush are favorite places for crappie spawn; anglers have learned to target these places when annual event begins.

Now let's look at some of the state's best spawning lakes.

THE REZ – BARNETT

Barnett Reservoir, also known as The Rez, gets the lion's share of crappie pressure in central Mississippi. The 33,000-acre impoundment has very little water-level fluctuation, which means crappie rarely have a failed spawn. Its population of slabs is less cyclic than other lakes.

Ryan Jones, a MDWFP fisheries biologist who oversees The Rez, said the normal prespawn pattern in March is following crappie from the river channel and creek mouths to spawning areas. It's a progression that takes weeks to complete and can vary between areas of the lake.

One way to pinpoint the start of the process, Jones said, is to keep an eye on the river channel at just south of the bridge on Mississippi Highway 43 and the area known as locally as "the Welfare Hole." It is a vast expanse where a big eddy current forms along the river. Shad find it in times of moving water,

crappie follow the shad and fishermen follow the crappie. It happens every year after February and March rains. When you see hundreds of boats, the prespawn migration hasn't started but soon will.

Once the water temperature reaches a steady 58 to 60 degrees, fish will start to move shallow. The spawn will start earliest in the shallower, upper-lake and Pelahatchie Bay areas and work down-stream to the dam. With miles of shoreline and acres of grass and other vegetation, crappie have more than ample spawning locations.

EAST-CENTRAL HOT SPOTS

Okatibbee Reservoir near Meridian has a healthy crappie population, and each year, great numbers of anglers head there to fish. Over the years, fish attractors have been added to the lake bottom. It's no secret a few cedar trees attached to a pallet and submerged with concrete blocks will attract crappie.

Jones has good things to say about Okatibbee.



Photo courtesy Ron Neal

Bill Bracken holds a 2-pound crappie caught on Okatibbee while slow-trolling an 1/8-ounce black-headed jig with a Monkey Milk-colored body during the March pre-spawn. **BELOW:** Popular spawning areas at Barnett Reservoir usually include vegetation, like this buck grass, with access to deep water.



David Hawkins



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"The lake has everything a crappie can want: good forage, trees, grass and riprap,"

he said. "Anglers will find the north ramp open all year and ample grass and riprap near deeper water to attract crappie during the prespawn. The northern end of the lake will warm faster, so the first spawning activity will be there."

Kemper County Lake is a sleeper when it comes to crappie. Brush piles are scattered around the lake from mid-depths to deeper water. Most shallow spawning areas are very close to deep water. Crappie will hold on these breaks as the prespawn progresses.

"I encourage anglers to go to the MDWFP website and study the bottom contours and brush pile locations on Kemper," Jones said. "Kemper is not a flood-control lake, so the level remains pretty steady. This means the grass and treetops are there when the crappie start to spawn, and there is little aside from weather to slow or deter the fish from spawning."

Angler Charles Golden of Taylorsville said the area around the boat ramp is an excellent place to judge where crappies are and what point in the spawn active fish have reached.

"There are good weeds and grass, root balls and treetops within a short run from the boat ramp," Golden said. "I spider-rig six poles from 4 feet down to 8 feet and follow the shoreline until I locate the fish. Then, I adjust all the rods to the same depth and fish for effect."

"Most times, I'll put two poles away; four will be all I can keep up with. The colors of the baits are different, ranging from pink heads with chartreuse bodies to white curlytails tipped with small minnows."

THE TENN-TOM

The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway gets a lot of notice for fabulous bass fishing, but the crappie bite can be just as exciting.

"A lot will depend on the water temperature and which lake the angler visits," said Trevor Knight, an MDWFP biologist



Ricky Flynt holds up a good stringer of crappie caught wading, a common practice in Mississippi's Delta oxbows and in U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lakes in North Mississippi.

Ricky Flynt

who works the area. "The river-section lakes — Aberdeen, Columbus and Aliceville — will warm up a little faster than the Bay Springs or Lock E. Good areas to start on the river section would be any old gravel pits or old river beds. Deep water with laydown trees in these areas are prime spots."

In the canal section (Locks A through E), Knight recommends looking for some fish to still be in early, prespawn mode around the locks, water-control structures, outflow pipes, ditches and gravel pits. Some late prespawn fish will be moving into the dormant water willow after a few warm days, especially close to deeper water.

On deep and clear Bay Springs Lake, a lot of fish will be deeper, still relating to contour changes, but after several warm, sunny days they will move up into the

standing timber and stumps in the backs of creeks. The north end of the lake will warm earlier than the deeper, clearer end.

DELTA OXBOWS

Lake Washington near Greenville is another good choice. It's a big oxbow, no longer connected to a river, and crappie like big water. The rich, alluvial soil makes it very fertile, so it can support lots of fish. The shad population — the main food source for crappie — is massive.

"There's no reproducing population of Asian carp in Lake Washington like in a lot of the river-connected oxbows," said Nathan Aycock, an MDWFP biologist. "We've done studies showing that when Asian carp invade a lake, they compete with juvenile gamefish and with shad and really hurt the fish numbers."



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SLAB-SLAMMIN' TIME

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"Since the Asian carp must have flowing water to spawn, they can't reproduce in Washington, so it's protected from them much more than river-connected oxbows such as Chotard."

Aycock said fewer rough fish like gar and buffalo are in Washington compared to other Delta oxbows. For example, Eagle Lake has a long, storied reputation for crappie; however, Asian carp were introduced to the lake during the 2011 flood. Bow fishermen are finding good numbers of rough fish in Eagle and have no trouble filling a boat with carp in nearby oxbows Chotard and Albemarle.

"In 2016, we changed from a 10-inch minimum length limit to 11 inches on crappie to better protect the lake from increasing fishing pressure," Aycock said. "This spring, we will be doing some further studies to evaluate the fish population again and make sure the regulations are still sufficient."

"First-timers on Lake Washington should definitely stop by one of the bait shops on the lake and talk with the owners, who are more than happy to help put people on fish. There are lots of cabins to rent on the lake for a weekend trip. Many local anglers seem pretty friendly and willing to point people in the right direction."

In the prespawn, drift-fish depths of 6 to 8 feet out from the shallow tree line. As the water temperature rises into the upper 60s, watch for the spawn to take place and look for crappie in less than 3 feet of water. Aycock recommends fishing the huge cypress swamps on the north or south ends of the lake or along

the western shoreline. Lots of crappie can be caught with minnows or jigs fished between the cypress knees.

Ron Neal and his son, Tyler, are team members in the Magnolia Crappie Club. The club visits Washington on a regular basis.

"The more you go there, the more you learn about the lake and the habits of the fish," Neal said. "It's one of my favorite lakes to fish, especially in March and April. You may have to swap around a little to see what color jig they are biting, but they'll always be biting shiners."

NORTH MISSISSIPPI'S BIG 4

Grenada, Enid, Sardis and Arkabutla lakes, all flood-control lakes managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, are to crappie anglers what Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming and Idaho are to elk hunters — world-class locations.

Each year, out-of-state anglers move into north Mississippi with hopes of catching limits of fish on these impoundments, and most will have success. The more trips made, the more information learned that is useful on the subsequent visits.

Keith Meals, the MDWFP biologist for the district, spends much of his time analyzing fisheries on these lakes. He sees good news for 2018, but it comes with a word of caution.

"March is a toss-up," he said. "So much depends on the water level, the rate of rise or fall and, of course, temperature," he said. "Most of the out-of-state anglers come down in March, but many find

HELPFUL WEBSITES

www.mdwfp.com — The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks' site has online fishing reports updated weekly and also has a depth maps and maps with locations of boat ramps and contact info for bait shops on most public lakes. Creel limits and minimum lengths may vary, so be aware of these numbers before you keep the fish. This information is posted on the website, and in the 2017-18 Outdoor Digest.

www.mvk.usace.army.mil/Missions/Engineering-and-Construction-Division/Hydraulics-Branch/Water-Control-Management/ — This page on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers website shows water-level information on north Mississippi's big four lakes. Click on River Bulletin and Hydrographs for the current year for each lake for a graph.

the water low and stained. That doesn't mean they can't catch fish, but they will have to work harder to do it.

"The prespawn usually begins when the water temperatures reach and maintain 58 degrees. The peak of the spawn is usually first or second week of April, when the temperatures in the same locations are 65 degrees."

Meals said a lot of factors have to come together for the spawn to be optimal. When the water level is stable and the

Many old gravel pits in Tenn-Tom lakes have vestiges of old mining operations, giving fishermen prime spots to fish during the pre-spawn. INSET: Nice slabs will put a serious bend in the light-action rods normally used to target them.



David Hawkins

water temperature is right, crappie will move from the staging areas into the shallows where some structure exists. But a drastic water-level change, as little as 2 to 3 inches a day, is enough to slow the activity. A rapid drop is more negative than a rise.

“The upper end of the lakes will warm sooner than the main lake, and the crappie there will spawn before those in the main lake,” Meals said. “Sardis is the longest lake of the four, and the spawn there will be the most stretched out.”

As flood-control lakes, there is a lack of structure to hold fish, and vegetation in the shallows is almost nonexistent. That means fish will be looking for stumps, exposed root balls and man-made structure (stake beds and or brush piles) as places to spawn. Deeper channels are like highways for prespawn crappie; every cove will have a ditch or channel.

Crappie will hold in deeper water, close to the shallows. Any good depth finder will assist an angler in locating these sorts of places. Side-imaging sonars can help fishermen locate additional structures that will hold fish along these underwater highways.

Boat ramps on the lakes can be a challenge. A lack of spring rains can cause some ramps to be inaccessible. ■



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

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EARLY KID, EARLY BIRD

By Mike O. Giles

Start youngsters on turkeys when they can understand and enjoy the process of calling in and taking a tom.

Scott Ellis yelped, purred and clucked, and he was greeted with thunderous gobbles from a couple of fired-up toms.

Two birds came in from different directions and areas, an interesting situation for 5-year-old Jake Ellis's first turkey encounter. Little Jake was smack dab in the middle of his dad and grandfather.

"Two gobblers raced in from different areas and started fighting," Scott Ellis said. "Jake couldn't get on him, so my dad shot one of them after about 30 minutes, and the other one jumped up on top of the first bird."

>



Calling champion Scott Ellis mentored his son Jake in turkey hunting, and believes once any child shows an interest, he or she can become hooked on the sport with the proper guidance.

Jake wasn't able to get that turkey, but he was hooked for life; he was a real turkey hunter from that point on."

When it comes to getting kids involved in turkey hunting and the outdoors, Scott Ellis knows more than a few things about getting them interested. Jake, now 11, was the 2017 NWTF Grand National Poultry's Division champion caller.

NO LIMITS: START THEM EARLY

"Jake grew up listening to turkey calls and sounds, because I was always practicing and honing my calling skills," said Scott Ellis, a resident of Mulberry, Fla., who has won practically every calling contest of note in the past 15 years. He knows a few things about calling and harvesting call-shy birds. He's put that knowledge to use with his own son as well.

"Jake heard all of the calls at a very young age," Ellis said. "Then he started asking me about the calls I was making and what I was doing, and I believe my answer to him was something anybody can use when trying to introduce their child to the sport of turkey hunting.

"We're actually talking to the animals in their own language, like Dr. Doolittle, kind of like a turkey whisperer. Jake started going with me at a young age, around 4 or 5 years old. I'd hand him a box call and let him run some calls, too. Not long after that, he was running

mouth calls. My goal was to teach him woodsmanship, so we don't sit very long."

FIRST BIRD

Although Jake Ellis didn't kill either of those two birds in that first encounter, he did succeed the next season.

"One year later, we got on a bird early in the morning but couldn't seal the deal," Scott Ellis said. "That afternoon, we set up and got a gobbler started, but it was still a ways off. Suddenly, a gobbler appeared in full strut just to our left, and he never said a word. He got about 25 yards from us and Jake had him in his sights."

"Boom!"

Jake dropped the Osceola gobbler, which had a 9-inch beard, weighed 13 pounds and had ¾-inch spurs.

KIDS' BASIC TURKEY HUNTING

Scott Ellis believes it's never good to rush a child into hunting, but if they're interested, you can develop that into a life-long hunting partner if you give them the opportunity with proper instructions.

"I want to make it fun, interesting, and keep them engaged," Ellis said. "There may be a time for hunting out of a blind, but I'm not in favor of putting a kid in a blind and sitting for several hours while they play video games.

"Take the time to tell them what goes on before you get to the woods. Explain how it works before you get there, and then let them know what's happening during the hunt so they'll understand

CALLING INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE CHAMP

Scott Ellis is a three-time Grand National Champion turkey caller who has beaten all comers in practically every venue. More than a champion caller, he's a tremendous turkey hunter, as evidenced by the gobblers he has killed all over the country.

Ellis has a passion for passing on his knowledge to young hunters as well as people new to the sport. He's produced many instructional videos and "how to call" clips. His most significant production to date may be his turkey calling app, Turkey Tech, and his DVD's, *Mouth Call Magic 1* and *2*.

His app will put instruction at your fingertips on your cell phone. Ellis produces eight types of calls, and viewers can learn them on a pot call and mouth call, on video and audio. On the audio portion, you will hear Ellis make the call and a live turkey produce the call. The video has detailed instructions on successful use of mouth and pot-style calls.

For more information, visit www.scottellis-eliteturkeyhuntingandcalling.com.

what's going on."

Ellis will set up on a gobbler on the roost if he has one located and tell the youngster what he's doing from start to finish. However, if they don't get a bird gobbling, he changes tactics.

"I'd take Jake through the woods and point out different things in nature as we



Part of a young hunter's training is learning during a hunt. Scott Ellis uses the time to point out different signs, explain strategy and give calling tips.

Mike Giles

walked," Ellis said. "I'd show him turkey scratching, tracks, strutting areas and point out different types of trees, bushes, anything that would keep him interested. Every so often, I'll stop and call and try to fire one up, and when we did get one to hammer back, we'd sit down, and it was on."

TALKING TURKEY

Eventually, it will be time to teach a youngster how to talk turkey.

"Jake started going with me when he was four, and I'd sit him down between my legs and whisper to him as things were happening," Ellis said. "I'd hand him a box call and let him run some calls. The box calls are the easiest to learn how to play, and they're deadly."

Ellis believes in teaching the kids how to play calls at home or anywhere they are, even while they're hunting, because turkeys make all kinds of sounds, and they all sound different.

"Not long after Jake started using the box call, he was running mouth calls," Ellis said. "Now, I'm not advocating starting all kids out on mouth calls that early, but Jake knew what they sounded like, and he wanted to try them, so I let him. It didn't take long for him to become

proficient with them."

Jake Ellis became so good that he competed in the national finals at age nine with only a mouth call. He was the only entrant to use only a mouth call, and he didn't win.

Victory came next year, when he won it all by utilizing all the calls at his disposal. In the process of learning how and when to use them, he became an accomplished turkey hunter and caller in his own right.

While not every kid will be a national champion caller, they can become excellent callers and hunters if they have a willing mentor to teach them. ■



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

MATCHING A YOUNG HUNTER TO THE RIGHT FIREARM

These days, manufacturers are marketing youth shotguns that are easy for even the smallest youngster to shoot — and more than adequate for harvesting a turkey with the proper training.

Master caller and hunter Scott Ellis said he went through all the steps with his son, Jake.

"I started Jake out with shooting sticks and a small shotgun," Ellis said. "We put small, turkey head targets on sticks and positioned them in the field around us and let him get comfortable with shooting them."

Each youngster will have limitations, and that's where the accompanying adult must know their capabilities and how much they can do, including maximum shooting range. In the case of Ellis's son, 25 yards was Jake's maximum range his first couple of years.

If you'll get your youngster a gun he or she can handle and let them practice in shooting positions they will likely encounter in the field, you can prepare them for the moment of truth. ■

Scott Ellis said using shooting sticks to help a youngster stabilize the gun can help early in their turkey hunting careers.



WHEN THINGS GETS TOUGH, SCRATCH OUT A TOM

Hunters love it when a turkey plan comes together right off the get-go, but sometimes a wary old gobbler will tease you with booming gobbles, but sit tight on his turf. Instead of scratching your noggin for answers, just simply scratch...literally.

Terry Hiers, a turkey hunting outfitter and guide, encounters plenty of tough gobblers in the woods and fields. One of his go-to tactics is a subtle approach mimicking natural sounds.

"Old birds often get hushed up when pressured and will stick to their home areas," Hiers said. "When I make a move on a reluctant bird or simply begin a hunt in an area with abundant turkey sign, I often go the natural route. As I slip in, I don't walk with a normal gait; I'll walk slowly, heel to toe, and often scratch my foot back from the toe, making a subtle, scratching sound. Gobblers have exceptional hearing, and mimicking a live turkey has multiple benefits.

"For openers, if turkeys are in the area, natural sounds are not alarming. A walk of a human through the leaves would be an alert trigger," he said. "This also sets up my next effort. Once I get to the target, I'll wait as long as 20 minutes before making any calls. Then, I'll often literally scratch the

leaves with my hands, again sounding like a feeding, contented turkey."

Hiers said this sets up the final part of the sequence: the actually calling. With nothing but natural turkey sounds coming from his position, Hiers said when he begins calling, it simply builds on the natural situation he's been creating.

"Turkeys are social, and while they get real wary when pressured, if I can sound like a turkey waking into an area before I even call, then it sets up my call. In this case, I will stick with the subtle, contented route and scratch out purrs and clucks, and any contented-sounding calls. This is not the time for loud cutts."

Hiers will use mouth and slate calls, because both create consistent purrs, clucks and other contented turkey sounds.

"This tactic is effective any time of the season, but it's great during the latter part of the season when working pressured gobblers," he said. ■

— Terry Madewell

FATHER AND SON GRAND SLAM

Getting a turkey grand slam — killing all four sub-species, Osceola, Eastern, Merriam's and Rio Grande — in a single season is a daunting task. Imagine a father and son accomplishing it; Scott and Jake Ellis did it in 2017.

"We started out hunting in Florida, and both of us got an Osceola," Scott Ellis said. "Then, we went to eastern Kentucky and hunted, and Jake and I both harvested Eastern birds.

"After we got our Eastern toms, I started thinking about the single season grand slam. We were about the halfway point of the turkey seasons around the country, mid-April, and it occurred to me that we might be able to do it."

When Scott Ellis got his Rio Grande in Kansas, he knew that the single-season grand slam was possible if everything went right. The next stop for the talented father and son duo was Oregon where they have both Rios and Merriam's.

"We had 3½ days to hunt with our good friends, Bo and Casey Brooks so we decided to see if we could get Jake's birds first and then see what happened," Ellis said. "As it turned out, Jake got both his Rio and Merriam's to complete his first grand slam, and we had one day to go. On the last day I got my Merriam's." ■



Scratching in the leaves while calling quietly is a great tactic to give an approaching gobbler a sense of security.



Jake Ellis finished off his turkey grand slam last season with this Rio Grande gobbler.

Terry Madewell

THE PROS AND CONS OF TURKEY DECOYS

Hunters typically fall into one of two camps when it comes to using turkey decoys: those who swear by them and those who don't want the hassle of carrying them into the woods and setting them up.

Most hunters agree that decoys can, at times, make a reluctant gobbler commit and close the distance to within shotgun range, but there are also many stories of turkeys turning and leaving at the sight of a decoy.

Veteran hunter Jeff Young swears by his David Smith decoys; he said their realism often makes unwilling gobblers commit, and he will rarely hunt without them.

Conversely, Charles Hudson, another veteran hunter, doesn't see the need for decoys. He has used them, but says, "It gives me an unfair advantage over the turkey." Preferring to hunt the bird on a different level, Hudson refrains from using decoys.

Both hunters agree, however, that a male decoy far out-performs a hen decoy. If I have to use only one, use a jake decoy; they seem to turn mature gobblers inside out.

When using a decoy, make sure it is visible from a long distance; you want interested turkeys to see it as soon as possible. Most hunters who use decoys will set them up in a field or open woods where visibility is good. The decoy is normally set up in front of the hunter at 15 to 20 yards, so when a gobbler gets to



Decoys, especially those imitating a jake, can be very effective in getting turkeys to commit and come into shotgun range.

Pete Rogers

the decoy, he is well inside killing range.

When it comes to decoys, the more realistic, the better. Whether you use a full body or just a fan, make sure it is as realistic as possible. The biggest drawback is their portability or lack thereof, so most hunters who use them regularly plan on sitting and getting birds to come to them. The use of a pop-up blind is a good combination when using decoys. Setting up behind a blind with the decoys in plane sight helps hunters remain hidden while gobblers are strolling closer to shotgun range. ■

— Pete Rogers



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COMPARING SHOTGUN LOADS FOR TURKEYS

One well-known turkey hunter once discussed different shotgun loads for gobblers this way: "The only reason I don't shoot 4-inch shells is because they don't make them."

That sentiment is common among hunters. The question remains, however, is bigger always better?

Not necessarily. To some degree, the larger, 3½-inch 12-gauge shells give a false sense of security. Longer shells do not necessarily provide better downrange patterns. Sure, they send more pellets downrange, but that doesn't always translate into more dead turkeys. You still have to know what your gun will do and ask yourself if the punishment on the back end is worth the benefit on the other end.

In many 12-gauge guns, a 3-inch shell produces a better and tighter pattern, while in other guns a 3½-inch shell does a better job. Likewise, 2¾-inch shells did

a marvelous job for a long time before the advent of the magnum loads. Don't underestimate the effectiveness of lighter loads placed in a gobbler's central nervous system. A good choke can often do a better job for your accuracy and efficiency than a bigger shell.

Another thing to consider is the size of the shot. Turkey loads in Nos. 4, 5 and 6 can all be very effective. Some of the non-lead shotshells are also effective and efficient. Non-lead shotshells normally come with a significant increase in recoil.

Hunters with smaller frames need to be aware before shooting these.

Smaller gauges are also getting a lot of support among turkey hunters, with a 3-inch 20-gauge shell being seen as an alternative to the bigger, 12-gauge loads. They're perfect for female hunters, youngsters and hunters with small frames, and manufacturers have recognized this



Many different turkey loads — 3½-inch 12-gauge, 3-inch 12-gauge, 3-inch 20-gauge — can be effective in the right hunter's hands.

Pete Rogers

and are making it easier to find good 20-gauge turkey loads.

The bottom line is, it really doesn't matter which you use when you squeeze the trigger. Good shot placement and effective, tight patterns will get the job done. ■

— Pete Rogers

PATTERNING YOUR SHOTGUN

One of the most-overlooked aspects of hunting with a smoothbore is the act of getting a good pattern for your shotgun.

Hunters are notorious for carefully sighting in their rifles and practicing with different loads at different ranges. But when it comes to shotguns, many take for granted that the pattern is good enough and do not test their shotguns. Shooting targets with heavy turkey loads is never fun, but it can be essential when it comes to making ethical shots on birds.

Each shotgun shoots slightly different. Knowing how your shotgun will pattern at different ranges with different loads is a boost of confidence. Similar to rifles, shotguns shoot different loads differently. Brand, style and choke combinations all effect the density of the pattern at different yardages. The only way to know what your gun will do with a particular load is to shoot at targets and compare the results.

Using a turkey target is essential, because

you can count the number of pellets that wind up in the kill zone at known yardages. This lets you know not only where your shotgun puts the most shot at different distances, but the gun's maximum range.

With turkey shells being rather expensive, getting a hunting buddy to pattern his gun while you pattern yours can help. Each shooter brings two different boxes of shells — think Nos. 4, 5 and 6 shot in 3- and 3½-inch 12-gauge, and each shooter shoots all four loads at 20, 30, 40 and 50 yards.

You may even try different screw-in chokes, if applicable. Some guns may have a tighter pattern with a standard full choke over an extra-full choke with certain loads. |

It shouldn't take long to determine which load patterns best in your gun and your buddy's gun, and you'll usually have plenty of shells in that load left over for the season. ■

— Pete Rogers



Patterning your shotgun at different ranges, with different loads, will give you a better idea about your weapon's capabilities.

Dan Kibler

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WHAT DO HUNTERS SEE IN BLINDS?

Hunting from a blind is a great way to get an edge on a wary gobbler, but good blind strategy will improve your odds, too.

Powell Kemp, who runs a commercial hunting operation, uses blinds throughout the season with excellent success.

"Blinds are crucial because it enables us to hunt areas otherwise difficult to hunt because of visibility," Kemp said. "I plan my hunts using blinds just as I do any hunt. I often set up blinds where I'm seeing turkeys in fields, so we're hunting places gobblers already want to go. But when in the woods, I'll often create a blind from the natural surroundings and materials."

Kemp (252-341-9804) said fields are a prime target, and when he sees gobblers strutting, he will often set up a blind for

the next day.

"Gobblers have routes they prefer to travel, and I'll locate the blind near where the bird is likely to enter the field," he said. "It's the same for strut zones in the woods. I'll often hunt without a blind early when working birds off the roost, but if that's not successful, we'll get to the blind where that gobbler is going. Blinds are particularly productive in the afternoon."

Kemp said gobblers often arrive with hens, and being quiet, limiting movement

and being patient still apply.

"A blind gives us an edge; the gobblers and hens are vigilant," he said. "Some think the blind shields all movement and noise from turkeys. Not so, but it helps minimize it enables us to get close. Full camouflage is still important."

Kemp said blinds can be natural objects in the woods or made from materials when no portable blind is available. Use natural vegetation to enhance and create a 3-D effect.

"Concealment is crucial and blinds are always helpful if you've got time," he said. "Use materials that blend with the natural vegetation. Don't drag in green pine limbs in an area that's undergone a prescribed burn, for example. Use materials in the immediate area." ■

— Terry Madewell

BROADHEADS FOR TURKEYS

Having the right gear is part and parcel to using archery equipment to take a turkey.

This may not come as a shock, but unlike other animals shot with bow-

and-arrow, turkeys are a bit different. Hunters recover more turkeys when the arrow actually stays in the bird. Selecting the right broadhead is essential for success.

Fortunately, manufacturers have been designing broadheads specifically for turkeys, and they are much more effective than a standard big-game

broadhead, which tends to pass through more turkeys.

Of broadheads designed specifically for turkeys, mechanical offerings excel over the fixed-blade variety. They fly well and open on impact, create a large hole and usually remain in the bird, which leads to greater recovery rates.

Broadheads designed for turkey hunting come in two types: those designed for head and neck shots and those designed for body shots. Those designed for head and neck shots carry long blades outside the center cutting tip, some extending as far as 2½ inches beyond the center, giving a killing reach of more than 4 inches. Head shots on turkeys are tough, but for those shooters who are extremely accurate, a mechanical broadhead that removes the head of a turkey is about as efficient as it gets.

Broadheads designed for body shots are made to cut a bigger hole. A big, strong broadhead is a great choice. The arrow needs to push through heavy feathers, thick muscle and bone to reach vitals. Broadheads that cut a minimum of 1½ inches are preferred over smaller broadheads.

Whichever you choose, practice is imperative to get the accuracy needed to make an ethical shot on a turkey. The kill zone is relatively small on a turkey, making the need for a deadly, ethical shot paramount, and that means practice, practice, practice. ■

— Pete Rogers



Mechanical broadheads have several advantages for hunters who want to take a gobbler with archery equipment.

Pete Rogers



Blinds built of natural vegetation can be great hiding places for hunters if located along turkeys' travel routes.

Terry Madewell

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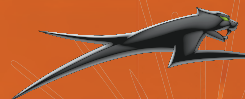


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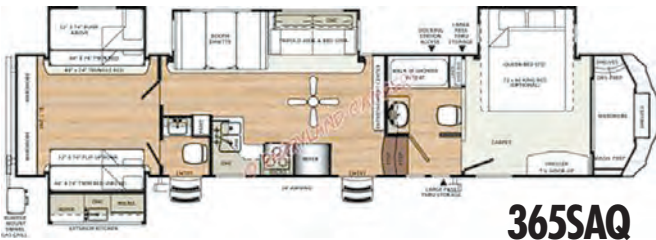
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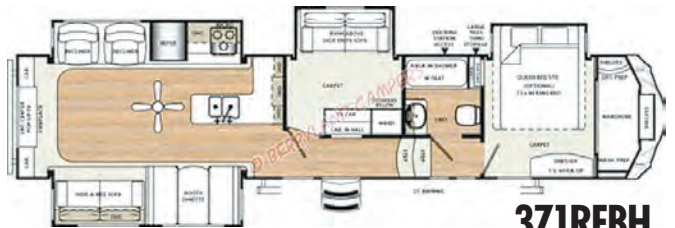


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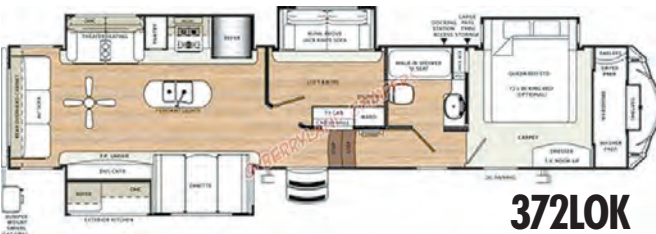
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Planer boards allow fishermen to slow-troll their baits and lures in extremely shallow water as prespawn slabs move toward the bank. Here's how to set up for this technique.

By Dusty Wilson

CRAPPIE ON A DIFFERENT PLANE

By the time March rolls around, crappie fishermen across the southeast are chomping at the bit for waves of slabs to invade the shallows. And even though tight-line and long-line trolling techniques are proven winners, guides like Brad Taylor are adding another wrinkle, using planer boards to spread baits out even farther from the boat and access territory otherwise out of reach.



Dan Kibler



Most anglers would agree that spring crappie fishing is an endeavor where every inch matters — corroborated by the 16-foot rods that sprout from the bow of a serious tight-liner's boat. The question is, how many split seconds can you give a fish to eye your bait before the hum of the trolling motor, hull slap or even the ping of a transducer give you away?

PLANER BOARDS TAKE BOAT NOISES OUT OF THE EQUATION.

“It's not a lazy man's game at all,” Taylor said, “but it's a very good way to catch those spawning fish. You can get a bait up there in shallow water where you couldn't get a boat without spooking the fish or places where you wouldn't want to take the boat — like a submerged stump field.”

Taylor's long-line trolling spread consists of three planer boards off each side of his boat. The first runs about 20 feet out, the second 30 feet out and the third 40 feet out, each staggered slightly behind the other due to the length of line necessary to add the distance from the boat. The rod whose bait is farthest from the boat is set in a rod holder closest to the stern, with the others staggered forward. This keeps boards and baits apart and cuts down on tangles when a fish is hooked.

Taylor said the tips of his rods should be raised slightly to lift more line out of the water so the planers cut into the water and fan out. In addition to planers, Taylor often runs a tradi-

“It's not a lazy man's game at all, but it's a very good way to catch those spawning fish.”

tional spread of four to six long lines off the transom from 20 to 40 feet behind his boat.

“It's a lot of work, because the guy on the shoreline side of the boat has to keep adjusting them to make them go around fallen trees or whatever is in the way,” he said. “You want to make that board go down the bank as close as you can get it. I like to fish them near cover and along breaks — places where the water will be 3 to 4 feet deep and drop off to 10 feet. Typically, the fish will be sitting off one of those drops. A lot of our spawning flats have a channel where the old creek bed went through, and you can run the boat through there and get the boards out into the shallow water.”



Running three or four lines on planer boards close to the bank is a great way to catch spawning crappie, but make no mistake, it takes some work.



Gaining a little weight isn't **ALWAYS BAD**

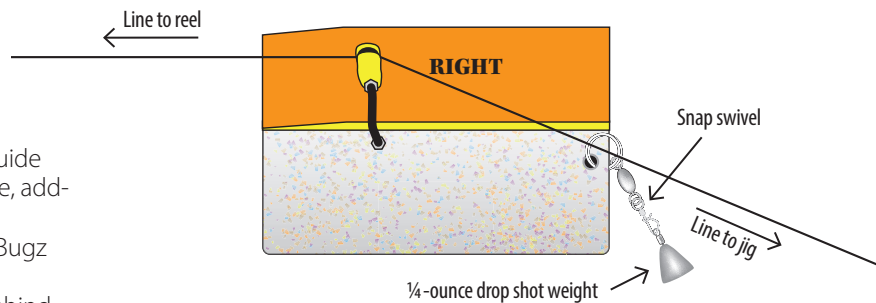
While most folks stress about putting on a little weight, guide Brad Taylor said that when pulling planer boards for crappie, adding a little weight can go a long way.

"You have to put something on them," Taylor said. "Water Bugz are the best that they've designed yet for crappie, but you don't have enough resistance with that little jig you pull behind them. If you add little weight to the back of the board, you'll get enough resistance to make it run hard."

Most of the time anglers in the south use planer boards, they're pulling bigger baits or lures for bigger fish; a healthy shad or a bigger pulls enough to causes the board to angle up and out and reach the optimal distance from the boat. A 1/2-ounce jig is doing next to nothing for this cause, but with a little modification, Taylor can increase the board's performance.

"The Water Bugz boards come with a spiral-type line holder on the opposite side of the line clip," said Taylor. "I take those off and put a snap swivel on it to hold the line. On that same swivel I snap on a drop-shot weight. It's something you have to tinker with, but it doesn't take a whole lot of weight. A 1/4-ounce will make it dig." ■

Light planer boards like Water Bugz are more suitable for pulling light lures and baits for crappie.



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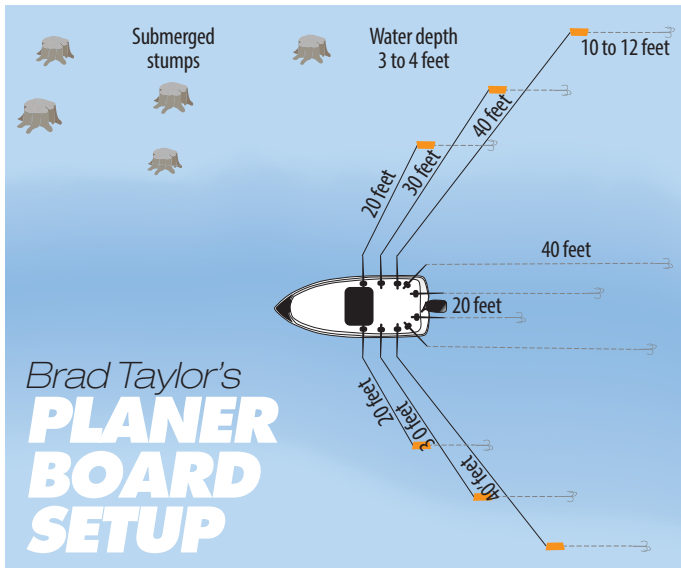
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In depths of 3 to 4 feet — trolling about 1 mile per hour — Taylor advises running a $\frac{1}{32}$ - or $\frac{1}{16}$ -ounce jighead with a 2-inch curlytail grub 10 to 12 feet behind the planer board, often lengthening the distance between the board and jig on the deeper side.

Two of Taylor's favorite jig colors are chartreuse/black and yellow/white, but given the shallow cover involved, you're bound to be sacrifice plenty of jigs. That's why Taylor ties a short leader of 4- to 6-pound mono with a barrel knot to his 8- to 10-pound mono leader. This way, the leader pops below the knot on the lighter line before the clip is released, allowing the board to be retrieved without stopping the show.

“You want to make that board go down the bank as close as you can get it.”

“Crappie will rarely ever break the clip free when they're hooked,” Taylor said, “and you run the risk of losing the fish or breaking the line if you try to snatch it free. I always just reel him up, because typically, you don't have much line out. It works a lot better with two people. The guy fishing towards the front of the boat will reel him up beside the boat, and the other guy can dip the fish out at the back, but there are times when I just unclip the board and deal with the fish.”

While there are a number of smaller, lightweight planer boards designed to be less cumbersome for crappie, Taylor said these will often lack the necessary buoyancy to make the board cut into the water and fan out. He uses the same Water Bugz planer boards that he pulls for stripers, but he said any board of a similar size is sufficient. ■



Dusty Wilson is a lifelong outdoorsman who manages a nursery when he isn't on the water or writing about what happens there.



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PUNCH YOUR TICKET FOR THE BASS BUFFET

By David A. Brown

Spring's prespawn period offers bass fishermen unique opportunities to catch active, hungry fish in shallow water. Make sure you don't miss out.

This winter has been a butt-kicker, but Pete Ponds isn't worried. For one thing, Ponds, a bass pro from Madison, has plenty of warm clothing, and he's thinking that recent weather patterns will produce more opportunities to catch fish during the seasonal transition period known as the prespawn. Extremely cold weather across the south this winter has put a dent in the shad population. Winters always affect shad, but this one has been brutal, and it will likely impact March fishing — not totally in a bad way. “I think that it's going to push

back the spawn a little bit, but also we're having more of a threadfin shad kill than normal,” Ponds said. “That's the main forage in all of our lakes in the south, but as the water gets into the 40s, it starts to kill the shad. “That affects the fishing, but not necessarily in a negative way, but a positive way. It depletes the food supplies a little bit. Some of our lakes were overabundant in shad, so your odds of catching a fish certainly increase. It's like having a buffet line with barely enough for everybody. All of a sudden, people will become more active looking for food.”





A proven prespawn pattern for Mississippi bass is swimming a lizard, which Gary Klein uses anywhere he fishes during this magical period. **INSET:** Even though the 2017-18 winter has been brutal, Pete Ponds knows good prespawn action and fat, egg-bellied bass will be available in March.



Photo courtesy Pete Ponds

>

And aside from the supply-and-demand scenario, bass pro Gary Klein said the prespawn brings more quality and trophy-sized bass within reasonable reach of anglers than any other time of the year. Proximity, plus appetite, he said, equals great opportunity.

“Prespawn is a cool time of year, because Mother Nature is forcing the fish into the shallows,” Klein said. “They’re starting to sit up there in the warmth and incubate their eggs. They’re putting on weight for the spawn, and they’re taking care of all the bream and other critters that are going to harass them on the nest.

“A higher percentage of these big fish are more accessible to anglers, because most guys that fish just on the weekends are shallow-water fishermen who throw to the targets they can see with their eyes. That’s what makes the prespawn cool; there are more fish relating to those targets at this time of the year.”

THE WHEN AND WHERE

Increasing daylight periods and moon phases put the giddy-up on ripening bass, but there’s no denying that severe winters delay the parade. That being said, bass, especially those with egg-swollen bellies, have to eat, and warming trends can trigger some absolutely amazing action.

“When we have consecutive cold nights and cold days, those fish almost go into a dormant stage,” Ponds said. “They don’t eat as much, and they’re not as aggressive. But when it finally does warm up, it’s like when we come inside after being outside in the cold. The fish will become more active.”

Of course, such perk-ups don’t happen everywhere, at least, not at the same time. Savvy anglers will use geography for maximum prespawn success.

“In the course of a day, you can’t fish the entire body of water,” Klein said. “So, I try to put myself in areas where I can see where the fish have come from and where they are going to move to for the spawn.

“I like to be on the side of the lake

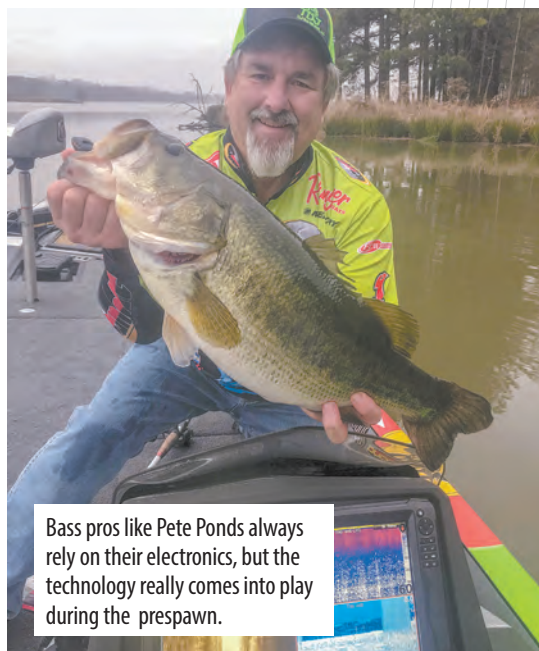
that’s out of the wind, the side of the lake that’s going to get all the afternoon sunshine. Those are usually the areas of the lake where the prespawn movement will start taking place before any other area.”

Ponds agrees, adding, “One main factor in your success would be the time of day you choose to go fishing. Afternoons are definitely better than mornings in the prespawn stages, especially on banks where the sun’s been shining and heating the water.

“Another point would be the water temperature. You would have a hard time searching for fish without a water-temperature gauge. That’s so important time of the year.”

Clearly impacting water temperatures, at least in the shallows, sun angles should always rank high on your prespawn checklist. As Ponds explains, planning your day around solar exposure can make a tremendous impact on your productivity.

“It’s so important to know when the sun rises and sets on your lake,



Bass pros like Pete Ponds always rely on their electronics, but the technology really comes into play during the prespawn.

Photo courtesy Pete Ponds

because you want the sun shining down on the area you’re fishing,” he said. “You might go to some area at 7 o’clock in the morning and never get a bite, but go back there at 5:30 and just tear them up.”

>

KEEP TRACK OF WHAT’S UNDER THE BOAT

Prespawn congregates big numbers of hungry fish in staging areas outside spawning flats, right? So why is it we might score a flurry of bites, only to have the action suddenly end?

Assuming no dramatic weather shifts, your first consideration would be bait choice. Maybe they’re tired of that noisy crankbait and you need to tone it down with a silent or single-knocker model. Color can also factor, as well as line size.

But...

Maybe you’re not throwing the wrong bait; maybe you’re throwing it in the wrong place. Bass pro Gary Klein said you can’t overstate the importance of understanding the fish’s realm.

“Your electronics are your eyes to the underwater world of the fish,” he said. “I don’t care if I’m flipping or fishing out deep, I’m always looking at my electronics. Not only am I trying to observe what’s going on below the boat, I’m using my electronics to position the boat for my cast.

“If I’m cranking or anything like that, angles are everything, and I love to fish uphill. I’m always trying to position my boat according to contour changes and angles.”

As Klein points out, it’s easy to forget when you’re getting bites, but constant awareness is the key to consistency. Remember, prespawn bass are marching along well-defined courses, so if you zig when the fish zag, you’ll be fishing barren water.

“You can go down a bank and get 10 bites and you look in front of you and think, ‘I’m going to get 100 bites by the time I get to the back of this thing,’ but you quit getting bites,” Klein said. “It could be because that channel swung off the bank, and now you’re up on the flat and the water there is still 52 degrees.

“Those fish are out there where that channel swings by that bank where they can come up shallow, but they’re not fully committed to that shallow flat stuff yet.”

Bottom line: Don’t assume consistency; earn consistency. ■

IT ALL ADDS UP TO MORE FISH IN THE BOAT.



"I was fishing 15lb Tactical and 30lb X-Braid in isolated reeds and stick-ups. That lighter line got me more bites and I had absolutely no trouble getting them out of everything." Tim Frederick
2018 FLW Tour Lake Okeechobee Champion.

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As far as prespawn targets, Ponds likes lily pad stems because they indicate the hard, sandy bottoms where bass like to spawn. He'll also consider what's on the bank, as this can further direct his search.

"I'm looking for naturally occurring pines, because most of the time, they grow around sandy areas," Ponds said.

TOP TACTICS

Early in the prespawn, Ponds likes a lipless crankbait, like the high-pitched Booyah Hard Knocker and the lower-pitched One Knocker. Both will produce this time of year, but Ponds taps each for different duties.

"I like the One Knocker on highly pressured waters and the Hard Knocker when there's not as much pressure," he said.

Another classic, the Smithwick Rattlin' Rogue, allows him to make slow presentations to suspended fish. Jerkbait cadence is something you'll have to dial in almost daily, but it's usually best to start with slow twitches and long pauses and then increase speed and frequency.

When it comes to covering water and finding groups of prespawn fish moving up, an alternative to lipless baits and the square-billed crankbaits often used are baits with a swimming presentation. Swimbait and swim jigs certainly work, but Ponds likes probing shallow flats by swimming a Texas-rigged YUM Lizard with a 1/4-ounce weight and a 4/0 Hyabusa hook.

"The lizard is a natural enemy of the bass," he said. "A lot of times, they'll hit it out of spite; they don't want it around their nests. They'll hit it just to kill it."

"You pull into the shallows, drop your Power Poles down and get very still just like you were squirrel hunting. Keep still

for about 15 minutes and look for movement in the water. Then, you make short casts to where you saw the fish move, and a lot of times they'll 'shark' behind it."

Ponds said adding a weight for the swimming presentation facilitates casting distance and accuracy. And if you attract a follower, don't slow the retrieve. Keep it going to stoke the fish's fire and maintain his interest.

Klein is another fan of the swimming lizard; he even helped Berkley design the Boss Dog, a thick-bodied lizard with sizable legs and a broad, ribbontail. Swimming a lizard, he says, is a way to find fish on productive waters if you don't know where to start.

"When you have so many areas that look good, the only way you can find them is to fish to locate fish," Klein said. "That Boss Dog swims so good, you just make a long cast and reel it. I've seen it happen so many times: you go through an area with a spinnerbait and get no bites, but then



Photos by David A. Brown



Pete Ponds will find any kind of bass travel route, here a creek channel with timber and an old fence row, to catch big fish moving from deep to shallow. INSET: Gary Klein is always ready to fine-tune his lures, like dipping the tail of a lizard in dye for just the right color.

go back through with a lizard and get 20 bites.”

In addition to swimming, Klein likes flipping lizards. He can be extremely accurate when prespawn bass are holding tight to cover.

“On man-made reservoirs or backwater oxbows with wood — whether it’s cypress trees, logs or bush tops — bass love to be around hard cover in prespawn,” Klein said. “I probably spend more time fishing hard cover in prespawn than I do just about any other time of the year.

“Hard cover offers them a shallow advantage where they can float up and get high in the water column to take advantage of the sun’s warmth. I love the flipping technique with an 8-foot rod and jigs or Texas-rigged plastics, because I can make very precise casts to particular spots. I’m very precise in how I present my baits, and ... you have a better advantage of landing that fish.”

With lizards, craws or any bait he is flipping, Klein often changes accent colors to increase the chances a fish will notice his bait, and to show the fish a convincing image. Whether it’s chartreuse to mimic the bream’s fin accents or reds and oranges to imitate those subtle hues of crawfish pinners, any advantage can help steer the game.

FIND TRAVEL ROUTES

Ponds said it’s always prudent to consider a bass’s travel routes. Nothing is random in nature, particularly the movement of fish charged with perpetuating their species.

“One of the things I look for is a creek going into a spawning flat,” Ponds said. “Sometimes it’s a road bed; sometimes it’s something as

small as a fence row. The fish will use them for roads like cars on the highway.

“There are two reasons the fish are where they are this time of year. One is because they’re reproducing, and the other is because of food. If you combine those two, that helps you find fish during the pre-spawn.” ■



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

On the warmest days, when bass are most active in March, Pete Ponds will move to a crankbait to cover a lot of water.



David A. Brown

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MARCH MADNESS:

By Bobby Cleveland

When the fish come to you

The wind is rarely a problem when you chart your course for nearshore action out of Biloxi, and plenty of fish will be around to make the short run a success.

The cast was a foot right of perfect, and the Boat Monkey float settled in the center of the concentric rings forming around its landing. A sea gull swooped down to check it out, only to turn away perhaps repulsed by the orange bobber —which suddenly was gone, jerked completely out of sight below the surf.

“Got one,” I hollered at Billy Grantham of Biloxi, who had promised a good March nearshore trip. “Not sure what though, but feels pretty good on this light tackle. Hope it’s edible.”

The 6-foot spinning boat was bent in an arc, and the 6-pound mono was stretched tight, even as the small reel gave line when the fish surged. It had been the first cast of the day.

“Just keep tight,” Grantham said. “Ain’t nothing down there he can snag you on to break you off. He’ll quit resisting in a minute.”

Right on schedule, I could feel the fish turning and, reluctantly, coming toward me. Grantham had the net and had moved by my side in the stern of his 22-foot center console.

“Let’s see what you got,” he said, dipping

the rubber net below the surface, a target into which I could guide the fish. When it got in reach, Grantham made a quick swoop and lifted the fish over the gunwale.

“You wanted edible, you got it; look at the thick slab shoulders on that sheephead,” Grantham said. “About 6 pounds; he’ll eat good, baked whole with some tomatoes, onions and garlic.”

“That’s a bonus catch today. We don’t usually catch sheephead in this area, but when we do, we usually catch several. They usually prefer deeper cover in March, like bridge pilings and reefs. I do catch them occasionally here behind Deer Island, but it’s always a surprise. We catch more of them on the Gulf side of the island.”

Grantham put the fish on ice and turned to get his rod out of the holder.

“Dadgummit, look, I got a fish; wonder how long he’s been on there?” he said. “Hope it’s another sheep.”

It was, and so were the next four 3- to 5-pound fish we put in the boat in the first 20 minutes. We had made a short run after launching from Point Cadet, crossing behind the Golden Nugget Casino to

reach Deer Island. Between the shore and the island, we were protected from the almost constant wind that plagues March fishermen on Mississippi’s Gulf Coast.

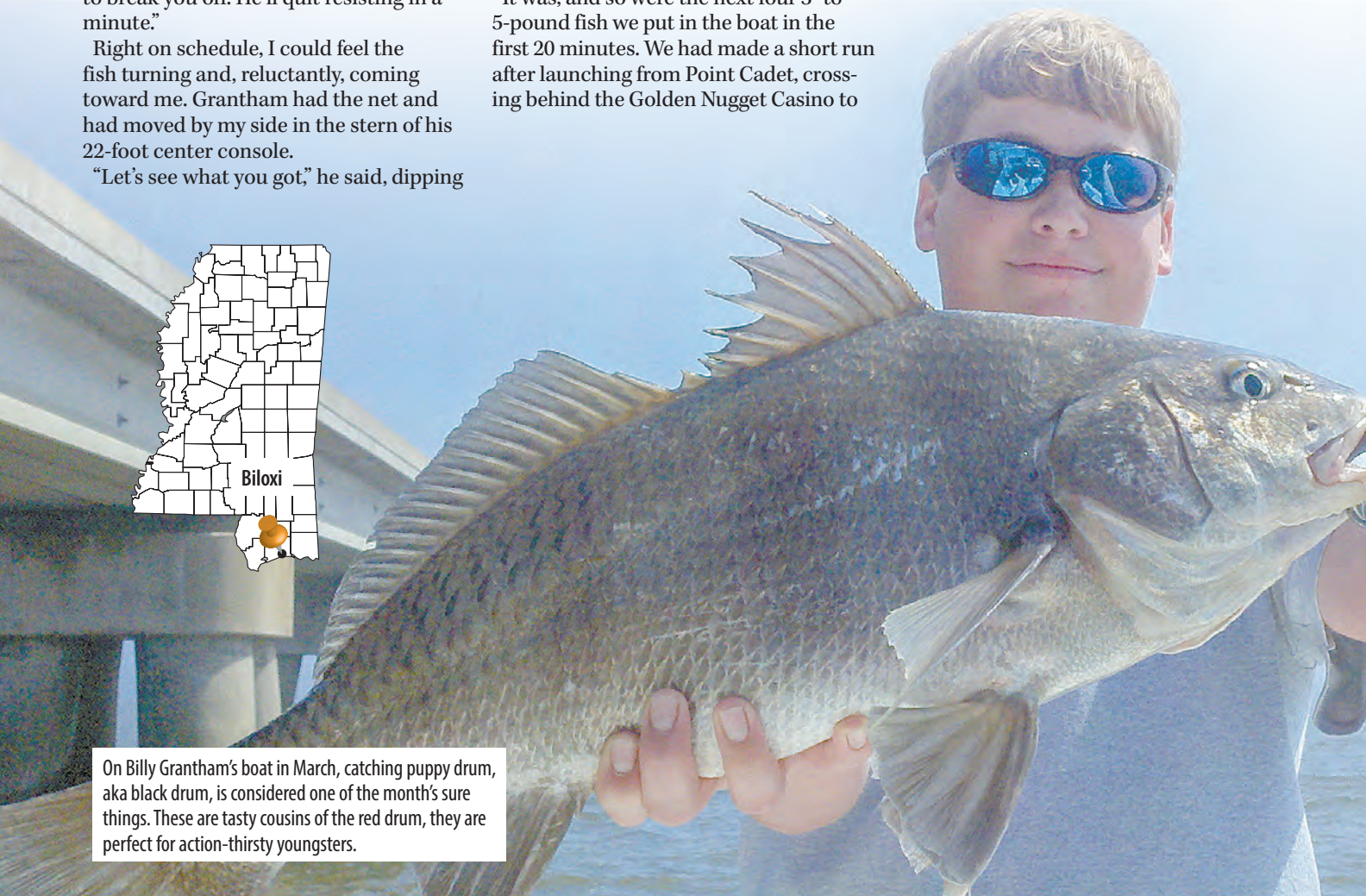
“That’s the main reason I like this place,” Grantham said. “March is still winter at least for three weeks and then the cusp of spring. We can have 80-degree days, and we can have freezing-degree days. We can have strong north winds, and we can have strong south winds. Here, it doesn’t matter. The wind has so little fetch to build any sizable waves.

“Three other reasons that make it a good March choice are, one, it takes less than two gallons of gas to fish all day; two, if the weather does go crazy quickly as it is apt to do, we are at the dock in two minutes; and, three, we always catch fish here. Don’t ever discount the importance of getting bit.”

Grantham prefers live shrimp for all of his



On Billy Grantham’s boat in March, catching puppy drum, aka black drum, is considered one of the month’s sure things. These are tasty cousins of the red drum, they are perfect for action-thirsty youngsters.



shallow-water fishing, but in March that can be a difficult buy.

"We've got minnows and finger mullet today, stuff I caught in a net yesterday afternoon in the bay and out front of the island," he said. "This time of year, shrimp eaters become minnow eaters. We have dead shrimp."

After putting six sheepshead in the ice chest, the action slowed, and Grantham pulled up his Power Poles and used his trolling motor to move us about 50 yards east. Down went the Power Poles, and out came the rods again.

"If we're going to catch any specks today, this is the spot. It's an old shell bed I found years ago. I think it's where somebody was dumping oyster shells, probably to build a private fish attractor," Grantham said. "Go with the bigger finger mullet, and let's see what happens."

Ten minutes in, Grantham's float disappeared.

"Throw over there! Throw over there where I hooked up!" he yelled to me. I had just reeled in to check my bait and was ready to follow his command. As soon as my float and mullet hit the water, Grantham told me to pop it one time "and hold on."

Bam! The shock of the vicious strike traveled up the line and through the rod. I set the hook with a sweeping motion used with live-bait hooks.

>

KINGS, GRAY SNAPPER DOMINATE MARCH OFFSHORE ACTION

Few are the days in March that offer calm conditions needed for most recreational boats to travel offshore safely from Mississippi's Gulf Coast, but when the opportunity to run is there, fishermen have a couple of options that make it worthwhile.

This month, king mackerel and gray snapper are two species that can be found and caught in decent numbers, and later in the month, keep an eye out for cobia to start migrating in from the east.

"Rest assured, we could catch all the red snapper, triggerfish and amberjack we can handle, but the seasons are not open on them," said angler Paul Pierce from Gulfport. "This crazy federal system of catch counts and tight seasons just kills me, but all I can do is laugh and go play with other fish. I don't like playing catch-and-release, because deep-water fish too often die from the pressure change.

I mainly catch for sport or to make smoked fish dip, and gray snapper, which I like better than red snapper. You can grill it, fry it, saute it... It's just great."

For kings, Pierce said finding the big silver streaks of summer, the 40- and 50-pound rockets, are rare.

"But 10- to 20- to 30-pounders are plentiful, and if you drop down to lighter tackle, say 15- or 20-pound gear, then it's a hoot," he said. "I like to pull up to the first oil rigs you get to from the shore, about 30 or 40 miles out, and start chumming and using live bait. When you hit the right rig, there will be literally hundreds of them. You can drop a live blue runner or a croaker down there, and the first one to see it hits it.

"The bonus is that even if the kings aren't there, chumming might bring up schools of snapper, both red and gray (aka mangrove snapper). We try to avoid hooking a red and will leave unless the snapper are mangroves. Then, we pull up our gear, switch to lighter and completely fluorocarbon line, and cut our chum and our bait in same-size pieces. You have to free-spool a line with no weight and bury the hook in the bait. Mangroves have keen eyes, and they see even better near the surface. The bait has to act like the chum or they will turn away and avoid it."

Pierce said you will see many of the bites, but a lot of times, "You have to watch your line. When you see it move erratically in any way, smoothly tighten up and feel for pressure. If you feel it, set the hook." ■



A wall full of gray snapper, aka mangrove snapper, is possible on the first oil rigs off the Gulf Coast, often found while chumming for king mackerel.

"So I target the few fish I think I can find plentiful higher in the water column. That's king mackerel, which

MARCH MADNESS

"That's no speck," I said.
 "Wanna bet," Grantham said.

He was obviously correct, judging by the undeniable trout-like commotion on top of the water. His speck was closer to the boat, while mine was still out by the site my float had landed. Both were splashing.

"Big ones," Grantham said.

Soon, we added two 3-pound specks to the ice chest, then two more — another 3-pounder or mine and a fat 5-pounder from Grantham. After that, the size fell off considerably, but we were able to add five 15-inch keepers before the bite stopped altogether. Grantham raised the poles, cranked the engine and started idling back across toward the casinos.

"You know those rods I tied for flounder? Grab one, and put a piece of that dead shrimp on the hook," he said. "You wanted some flatfish?"

Well I'm taking you to a secret spot. Don't tell anybody or write about it. Just tell them we fished some jetty rocks."

A promise made is a promise kept, especially about a fishing spot, but Grantham did explain that the key was finding a place in the rocks where there was some water movement from one side to the other. His spot was just such a hole, and one that he admits he added some legal structure to for the purposes of attracting and holding flounder. Exactly what he put down, he didn't share. Suffice it to say, it worked.

We put four platter-sized flounder in the boat in 15 minutes.

"Let's have a beverage and a sandwich and let it (the spot) reload," Grantham said, winking. The 20-minute break seemed ridiculously short for fish to move in, but it wasn't.

On each of our first two casts, we boated flounder.

continued on page 64



Fishing rocks in the channel between Deer Island and Biloxi's Casino Row can put flounder in the ice box.

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PILING ON SHEEPSHEAD AT THE BRIDGES

Sheepshead get little respect outside of the small percentage of coastal fishermen who relish the winter opportunity to easily rack up big catches of the freakishly toothy fish with silvery sides and black vertical bars.

"They're plentiful. They're fine eating. They're fun to catch," said guide Kenny Shiyou of Shore Thing Charters in Waveland. "And all you have to do is motor about a mile from the beachfront landing in Bay St. Louis and fish the (U.S) Highway 90 bride pilings."

Fishermen call it "piling on sheepshead" — fishing cut or live bait at the bases of the Highway 98 bridge pilings at Bay St. Louis, Biloxi Bay and the Pascagoula River.

"You can also catch redfish, black drum and even a rare speck of flounder," Shiyou said. "That's what I tell my young clients, that the fun of fishing the Gulf is that you never know what you're going to catch when you put a bait in the water. I love to put young-un's on the sheepshead, because as long as they are catching something, they're happy. And when we find the right piling that day, it's on like gangbusters."

"But it's also a great trip for all fishermen because the sheepshead, the reds and the puppy drum, all of that is great eating. In colder temperatures — and I really think the bite is better when it's coldest — we can usually fill the fish box by noon, starting at 8 a.m. That's a quick, productive trip that rarely lasts long enough for anybody to get too cold. The action usually keeps them pretty fired up and warm."

Shiyou prefers spinning reels with 15- to 20-pound test braid with a short piece of 20- or 30-pound fluorocarbon leader and a quarter- or half-ounce weight.

"If you can flip a baitcast reel proficiently, that's even better," he said. "We want the bait to fall right beside the piling. That is critical. It's like the fish are glued to the pilings by their faces. The new bridge across Bay St. Louis built after Hurricane Katrina is perfect, because its pilings have this big, flat, platform-like square just above the water line. You can toss the bait up on the flat concrete, then with a free spool, drag it off the edge and let it fall."

"You have to keep close contact with line at all times, though, because a fish might hit it before it reaches bottom. We use the braid and the heavy fluorocarbon to hold up to the rough abrasive pilings, but it also gives us better feel of the line. We also see the line twitch when we get a bite."

Shiyou and other guides often position their boats parallel to the pilings, with the bow of the boat facing into either a north or south wind. There is a trick to dropping anchor just far enough out to allow the boat to drift into position before cleating off the anchor line with the boat sitting in perfect casting position about 10 to 15 feet from the piling. ■



Fishing the pilings of the bridges on U.S. 98 promises a lot of hot action, especially for sheepshead.

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MARCH MADNESS

Grantham is a recreational fisherman who makes a lot of money at his day job, playing the stock market in his robe at home. He has never considered fishing for a living, as a guide, but he could certainly make a go of it.

March and April are his favorite months, he said, "because the fish come to us."

"That means they move shallow and close to shore. I don't have to make the long runs. On days like today, on a strong south wind, we couldn't have fished in the Mississippi Sound even if we could have crossed it to reach the north sides of Horn, Ship or Cat islands. We could have caught fish there, probably more and bigger, especially redbfish."

Grantham said it's just not worth the risk of running across the potentially rough sound, which can build quickly.

"Actually, in March, I prefer to fish the shallow reefs south of Cat and around Horn, because I can catch more fish concentrated in a few areas," he said. "I catch come of my biggest specks in March on the man-made reefs in 4 to 6 feet of water

within a few hundred yards of the islands (south side of Deer, north side of Horn).

"At Horn, I can get a limit of reds, too, usually in an hour, if I can find them small enough to fit in the legal slot (18 to 30 inches). Sometimes, it's hard to find anything under 30 inches, but boy, is it fun."

When he has friends that want to tie into something big, Grantham will seek the black drum, aka puppy drum, that will weigh up to 8 pounds. They are plentiful on the bridge pilings and around near-shore artificial reefs.

"We can use dead bait shrimp and catch keepers, or we can use cut chunks of mullet and try for the big black drum over 25 and 30 pounds," he said. "In 2017, in March, my cousin from Atlanta caught our biggest of the year, a 52-pounder on a mullet on 15-pound braid with a foot-long piece of 10-pound fluorocarbon leader. Took an hour.

"It was fun."

And, when it was over, they were just a mile from the launch.

Perfect! ■



Fishing inside the nearshore barrier islands in March gives Mississippi Gulf Coast fishermen their first crack at big speckled trout.



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.

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SHELLCRACKER FEVER IS HEATING UP

By Phillip Gentry

March marks the beginning of spring fishing for redbreast sunfish in Mississippi, especially on a handful of state-managed lakes. Here's the info on filling up that stringer.

May is widely considered to be the best month for chasing bream, but die-hard panfish anglers know that redear sunfish — aka chinquapin, shellcracker or just redear — move into their prespawn and spawning patterns much sooner than bluegill and other sunfish species that fall under the general colloquialism of “bream.”

Mississippi has some stellar shellcracker fishing across the state, but none are better managed than in several of the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks’ state lakes. Here’s a rundown of some of the top state lakes to visit this month if you’re looking for shellcrackers.

TIPPAH COUNTY LAKE

Located in extreme northern Mississippi, not far from the Tennessee border, Tippah County Lake was built in 1972 as a soil-conservation lake and opened for fishing in 1974.

Like all state lakes, Tippah County Lake is stocked with bass, crappie, bream and a few catfish. Jim Cutberth, the lake manager, said that, during the early spring, most anglers split their time fishing for bream, particularly redear sunfish, and crappie. A few bass fishermen will also visit the 145-acre lake.

“We do creel surveys throughout the year, and we shock the lake every year in the fall, and our biologists use that information to see what the lake needs,” Cutberth said. “If it needs fish, we put

them in. We fertilize the lake throughout the summer. In fact, this lake is better balanced to provide more fish caught per hour fishing than many of the state’s big reservoirs.”

David Berry, MDWFP project manager for state lakes, suggests that Tippah County Lake anglers have reason to focus their efforts on shellcracker; the state-record shellcracker, a 3.33-pound fish, was caught there by James K. Martin on Nov. 5, 1991.

“It’s something we are very proud of, to have a state record come from one of our state lakes,” Berry said.

Berry said MDWFP has stocked both bluegill and redear sunfish in the lake, and both species seem to thrive there, thanks to “a gravelly, sandy, soil bottom.... That’s an advantage there for both the bluegill and redear.”

LAKE CLAUDE BENNETT

About halfway between Laurel and Meridian in Jasper County is one of Mississippi’s best state lakes, 71-acre Lake Claude Bennett. According to Jason Thigpen, the lake manager, the bream species, particularly redear, have made the lake a popular destination.

“The lake is known for large bream: large bluegill and large redear,” Thigpen said. “They start biting usually when the water temperature gets in the mid-60s. Basically,

our anglers will use worms for shellcracker and crickets for bluegill, and they’ll fish near the gravel beds that we have installed in the lake over the years. They usually produce good numbers of fish.”

One primary benefit of Lake Claude Bennett is its ease of access for bank fishing. The lake was built to include earthen points, designed to put the angler within reach of deeper water and good fish. It also has a large, wooden pier.

Larry Bull, MDWFP’s assistant director of fisheries, said Claude Bennett is one of the best bank-fishing venues in the state’s program.

TRIP INFO: SHELLCRACKER HOT SPOTS

Tippah County Lake: Located in Tippah County, 2½ miles north of Ripley off MS 15 and 2½ west of Lake at 1180 County Road 410, Ripley, 38663.

Lake Claude Bennett: Located in Jasper County, 20 miles east of Bay Springs off MS 18 at 100 Wells St., Bay Springs, 39422.

Simpson County Lake: Located in Simpson County, 5 miles south of Mendenhall and 5 miles north of Magee on US 49 at . 137 Legion Lake Rd., Mendenhall, 39114.

Neshoba County Lake: Located in Neshoba County, 7 miles southeast of Philadelphia off MS 486 at 10360 County Road 1711, Philadelphia, 39350.



Anglers may have a hard time adjusting to aquatic grass in several state lakes like Neshoba County, but grass makes for great shellcracker fishing.

“All of Mississippi’s state lakes are designed to provide ample bank-fishing access,” Bull said. “Lake Claude Bennett in Jasper County has a wooden fishing pier on its southern shore between the boat ramp and the on-site campground. In addition, there are seven earthen piers that allow anglers access to deeper water. There are gravel beds within reach.”

SIMPSON COUNTY LAKE

Located within sight of US 49 between Mendenhall and Magee, Simpson County Lake is definitely a standout when it comes to fishing for shellcracker, or chinquapin, as the locals prefer to call them. Bull said the lake has some big specimens living there.

“In the spring, we’ve got some shellcracker — chinquapin, red-ear, whatever term you want to use — that will go 2 pounds,” Bull said. “Our anglers catch them all the time a pound-and-a-half, 2 pounds, but we have seen some that would go 3 pounds.”

The 75-acre lake is not only a good venue for redear, it’s got a decent population of bluegill and

a variety of different bluegill sub-species.

Tactics for catching bream are pretty similar, and the ample bank-fishing access afforded at Simpson County means anglers without a boat have a better-than-average shot at catching some quality fish.

“We’ve got the copper-nose bluegill, regular bluegill and the chinquapin,” Bull said. “The chinquapin will bed before the bluegill. You can catch them by fishing with red worms on the bottom, and you can find them on shallow points sticking out into deeper water all over the lake. You can be on the bank tight-lining, or you can get in the boat and fish around the stumps.”

NESHOBA COUNTY LAKE

This 138-acre lake near Philadelphia has been making headlines for its giant bass — and rightfully so. Even so, for the bream fisherman, early spring is a great time to fish Neshoba County Lake.

continued on page 71 >



Because shellcrackers feed closer to the bottom than bluegill, baits like red worms are more effective than crickets.

Phillip Gentry

TIPS FOR CATCHING SHELLCRACKERS

Use these tips to catch more shellcrackers:

- Shellcrackers are colony breeders. If you chance upon one fish, circle back and fish that area thoroughly, because the likelihood of there being more fish is great.
- A shellcracker’s diet consists mostly of mollusks, worms, insect larvae and shrimp. Insects such as crickets and grasshoppers are not typical fare for shellcrackers.
- Because of their diet, shellcrackers tend to feed more on the bottom rather than feeding up or on the surface like bluegills, making tight-lining a good method.
- Shellcrackers tend to spawn earlier and deeper than bluegills and are often found using the same historical sand or clay bottoms as bluegill. You can test an old bream bed for shellcrackers by probing the deeper, outer edges with a worm starting in March.
- Small, soft-plastic crappie jigs on a No. 2 or No. 4 hook rigged with plastic creature baits — crawfish, nymphs or hellgrammites — make excellent artificial baits for shellcrackers.
- One of the best baits for trophy-sized shellcrackers is a thumbnail-sized freshwater clam or mussel. These can be dug from the bottom with a rake (where legal) and crushed, then have a hook inserted through the shell and fished on the bottom.



One of the best features about fishing any of Mississippi’s state lakes is ample bank and pier access to good fishing grounds.

Phillip Gentry

**BREAM ID:
SHELLCRACKERS
AND BLUEGILLS**

Although lumped together in many circumstances under the handle bream, bluegill and redear sunfish have distinctly different characteristics, especially when anglers target one species or the other.

Both are members of the sunfish family and range across Mississippi. In addition, both are frequently stocked in state lakes and farm ponds — along with largemouth bass — as a means of creating a balanced ecosystem in smaller bodies of water.

The species differ slightly in physical characteristics. Bluegill have an orange/yellow sheen and an olive coloration, while redear, aka chinquapin or shellcracker, have a more gold/green coloration. The tip of the gill cover, or operculum, is deep blue to black in bluegill and black, lined with red or orange in chinquapins. This characteristic lends to the name redear.

Both species have small mouths with

no teeth on the tongue, however redear do have pharyngeal teeth in the throat area that are used to crush the shells of snails and mussels. While both species are highly opportunistic feeders, the ability to crush prey with these teeth tends to separate the habitats of the two species and produces the nickname shellcracker.

Bluegill feed primarily on insects, invertebrates and small fish, mostly near the surface. Redear feed on the bottom and prefer crayfish, mussels, snails and insect larvae.

Both species have similar, if not exact, habitat preferences. They may be found in a variety of habitat types, including

ponds, lakes, reservoirs, swamps, streams and small rivers. Shellcrackers exhibit a preference for slow-moving, sluggish or non-flowing waters and are often found in or near areas of vegetation and over a mud or sand bottom. ■



**Redear Sunfish
(Chinquapin)**

Coloration, teeth in the throat and a light orange or red line around the ear flap are ways to tell a shellcracker (above) from a bluegill.

Bluegill

Phillip Gentry

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Chuck Hazelwood, the lake manager, said there are plenty of “better-than-hand-sized shellcracker” to be caught at Neshoba. One aspect of fishing the lake early in the year is that the aquatic vegetation starts growing back — that can take some getting used to — but there is also some great man-made structure for seeking out shellcracker.

“Several years ago was the first time we sunk trees in the lake,” Hazelwood said. “On the right-hand side, going out toward the island, we put out some cedar trees on those flats and marked them with buoys.”

Contrary to popular belief, the grass in Neshoba is not out of hand but is part of the lake’s habitat.

Berry said not everyone feels that way the first time they visit the lake, but all it takes is finding a school of shellcrackers, which are right at home in the aquatic vegetation, “and they change their minds pretty quickly.” ■



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.



This state-lake angler had a great day bream fishing for shellcracker and bluegill.

Dwight Shepard

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GETTIN' FRESH

Hal Schramm

Trolling is an effective way to catch crappie in flood-control reservoirs. Notice the absence of cover in the background needed for successful crappie spawning.



MANAGING CRAPPIE IS OFTEN A WATER ISSUE

HIGH WATER IN MISSISSIPPI'S FLOOD-CONTROL RESERVOIRS USUALLY MEANS A GOOD SPAWN, BUT FLOODING IS COMPLEX

MWDFP

Reservoir crappie populations are notoriously cyclic. A strong year-class is produced once every few years and is usually followed by one or more weak year-classes. When the fish reach catchable size, the abundant cohort supports good to excellent fishing for a few years until members of the once abundant year-class are caught or die of old age.

For crappie populations with fast growth rates and low natural mortality, which is the case with crappie in Mississippi's flood-control reservoirs — Arkabutla, Sardis, Enid and Grenada — high length limits can improve yield, measured as the pounds of fish in the cooler at the end of a trip. They may help stretch the good fishing for an extra year or two, hopefully long enough for another strong year-class to enter the fishery. But good reproduction is needed to produce strong year-classes.

VEGETATION IS KEY

Inundated vegetation is essential for successful crappie reproduction and

survival of the fry. In the main bodies of Mississippi's flood-control reservoirs (FCRs), the only remaining vegetation is terrestrial plants high on the bank. Fisheries researchers at Mississippi State have found the vegetated floodplain in the upper ends of these reservoirs can be important crappie spawning and rearing habitat.

Whether upstream or down, high water is needed to flood the vegetation. Keith Meals, a fisheries biologist for the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks responsible for fisheries management on these reservoirs, has learned that strong year-classes generally follow high-water springs.

FISHING, FARMING

It would seem crappie management in the FCRs is simple: raise the water before the spawn. Indeed, that would probably work, but recreational fishing is secondary to safeguarding people and their livelihoods.

The flat, fertile Yazoo River Basin contains some of the most-productive

agricultural acreage in North America, but you can't live on or farm flooded land. High, spring flood waters on the Mississippi River raise the water in the Yazoo Basin and reduce Yazoo River discharge. Heavy rains in the Yazoo Basin, coupled with high Mississippi River stages, result in extensive flooding in the lower Yazoo Basin.

In the decades after the epic 1927 flood,



This nice Grenada Lake crappie weighed almost 3 pounds.

the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was charged with minimizing flooding in the Mississippi River valley. Mississippi's four FCRs are part of this effort. A complex series of water-control structures was installed in the lower Yazoo Basin, and the FCRs were built to hold water flowing down from the upper Yazoo Basin. Although the product of extensive surveying and engineering design, the reservoirs are essentially large, water-storage tanks with a valve at the lower end. The greatest flood-control benefits would be achieved if the tanks were empty before the late winter and spring rains.

Recreational purposes, including fishing, were added to the benefits of the FCRs as an afterthought, and "rule curves" were developed to provide guidance for seasonally adjusting water levels. The rule curves were designed to accomplish the primary purpose of flood control while trying to accommodate other interests.

To provide flood-storage capacity in Enid, Sardis and Granada lakes, the rule curves specify maintaining low water in December and January, allowing a slow rise in February and March, and then a rapid rise to full pool in April. In Arkabutla, the water level is supposed to remain low from December through April and then allow a rapid rise to full pool in May. With most of the crappie spawn occurring in March and April, the rule curves are imperfectly conducive to crappie spawning in these denuded-shoreline reservoirs. But these reservoirs were built for flood control in an area far larger than the area of the reservoirs.

SPRING RAIN GAINS

Rule curves specify water-management targets, but rains upstream fill reservoirs, and downstream flooding determines whether water can be released. Thus, despite rule curves, high water occurs



WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE?

Creel limits and size minimums can extend the effects of a great crappie spawn, but water levels during spawning time are still the one factor that most affects the good fishing in a reservoir.

before and during the crappie spawn in some years, and they usually produce strong year-classes, according to Meals.

The fishery management challenge is how to sustain quality crappie fishing in a dynamic, unpredictable environment. ■



Hal Schramm is an avid angler and veteran fisheries biologist.

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Paul Elias

On those gravel points at Bay Springs, you'll often locate schools of largemouths as well as spotted and smallmouth bass.

BAY SPRINGS' BASS TRIPLE PLAY

ALL 3 MAIN BLACK BASS SPECIES — LARGEMOUTH, SMALLMOUTH AND SPOTS — ARE MARCH TARGETS

I enjoy fishing Bay Springs Lake in March, because I like catching largemouth, spotted and smallmouth bass on the same lake, often in the same places and sometimes on the same lure.

With bass in a prespawn mode and moving shallow, I depend heavily on my Garmin Panoptix depth finder to actually see the bass and learn whether they're suspended or moving. I can spot schools of baitfish 60 to 80 feet off the bank and any bass related to those schools.

Two tactics work best this month for bass. Early in March, we'll be fishing a suspended jerkbait, since the water is still cold, and the bass will be schooled up, lethargic and moving toward spawning areas. From mid-March until the end of the month, I'll be fishing a Carolina rig and a Mann's C4 square-bill crankbait.

EARLY MARCH TIPS

I've found a bait like a Suspending Rogue in the Saturday Night Special

color — a clear body with some purple and chartreuse on its back — to be productive in 42- to 48-degree water. I've always been able to catch fish on one in places and times when bass needed a suspending bait.

I like to fish a Rogue on a 7.4-to-1 Shimano Curado reel with 12-pound White Peacock fluorocarbon line on a 6-foot-6, medium-action Shimano bait-casting rod. After casting, I'll reel the bait down until it reaches 5 to 7 feet of water. I'll stop the bait, jerk it a couple of times, let it sit motionless for seven to 10 seconds, next twitch the bait and allow it to sit another seven to 10 seconds.

One of the problems associated with fishing a suspended jerkbait is that most anglers won't let the bait sit that long without moving it. However, the colder the water, the longer I let the lure sit still. And I'll get more bites.



A Mann's C4 crankbait is a good tool to catch bass in the last half of March on Bay Springs Lake.

When bass bite, they bite lightly — like the small peck you'll feel when one picks up a plastic worm. Once I feel the strike, I don't try to set the hook hard, but instead pull the bait to me and reel at the same time.

These jerkbaits usually carry small hooks, and that's why you use a soft hookset and not rush the bass to the boat. Play the bass down before you get it

Paul Elias likes Bay Springs in March because bass will be moving shallow, and you never know whether you're catching a largemouth, a smallmouth or a spotted bass when the fish takes the bait.

to the boat. The good news is that a bass generally won't jump that much in the cold water.

You need to be careful when you're putting bass in the boat. Many anglers will try to lip a bass and put it in the boat, but I've found a better method is to place my hand in the water under the bass's stomach and lift it into the boat. That keeps my hands away from those treble hooks.

I concentrate on the lower end of the lake and fish the riprap around and at the face of the dam for nice spotted bass. Sometimes, you can catch a big smallmouth there, too. I'll also fish ends of bluffs and underwater points that quickly fall off into deep water.

LATE MARCH

From mid-March on, bass will move up on the points more, and although the jerk-bait still will produce bass, I'll go to a Carolina rig. I like having that 1-ounce lead drag on the bottom to feel depth changes, mussel shell beds and gravel points.

A Carolina rig will produce bass year-round, but especially in the spring. I'll have the barrel swivel tied to 60-pound bass braid with a 1-ounce lead above the swivel. On the other end of the swivel, I'll have a leader of 23-pound fluorocarbon tied to a No. 5/0, wide-gap hook. I'll use a 6-inch, green pumpkin Mann's Hardnose Lizard with the tail dipped in chartreuse dye on a 7½-foot, medium-heavy Curado rod and 6-to-1 reel.

I'll concentrate my fishing on points, both main-lake and secondary; main-lake pockets are where smallmouth will be spawning. I'll fish from the bank out to 15 feet of water. I'll also throw a crawfish-colored Mann's C4 square-bill crankbait in these same places.

Using these techniques,, you'll have a mixed bag of bass at the end of the day. If you catch 12 bass, you'll have had a good day with numbers of 2- to 4-pounders — and possibly a 5-pounder as a bonus. ■



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



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HAPPY TRAILS

Bill Garbo

The pine tree where the author's son-in-law hung precariously after his hang-on stand dropped out from under him. **INSET:** One of the trail-camera photos that caused him to want to be in an afternoon stand in mid-January.

HOW'D THAT HAPPEN?

TREE-STAND FAILURE BRINGS UP A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS

On one particular afternoon in mid-January, my son-in-law, Jody, had the itch to head over to his favorite deer-hunting area to try and get a crack at a couple of elusive, mature bucks he had captured on trail camera. The weather was right, and the wind was blowing from a favorable direction, enabling him to get into a really thick area where these late-rut bucks seemed to be holed up.

After dressing and gearing up, he made the 10-minute drive, thinking about how best to stalk his way in and remain undetected. Arriving at 2 o'clock, Jody parked his truck and began the hike in for his afternoon vigil.

His destination was a lock-on stand about 20 feet up in a decent-sized pine tree. The stand was secured by two nylon ratchet straps and was accessed from the ground by a long, stick ladder secured to the tree trunk with nylon straps.

THE CATCH

Jody had not actually visited the stand since the previous season, but everything had been fine and dandy the last time he'd sat in it. It was in a great location for catching a late-season, pressure-shy buck due to a patchwork of heavy hiding and bedding cover that blanketed the area. His laser focus was on outwitting one of these bucks and nothing else.

Jody did adhere to one hard, fast safety rule. Unless he was going to be in a platform or shooting house or in a tripod stand, he always wore a safety vest with an integral harness secured to the tree above shoulder level by a heavy duty nylon strap.

After arriving at the stand, he climbed



the stick ladder, swung over onto the stand's platform, secured his safety strap to the tree trunk, pulled the seat down into position and settled in for what he hoped would be a successful afternoon.

The stand was situated with respect to the wind direction, and in anticipation of the expected direction of deer travel, it was necessary for Jody to orient himself on the seat pivoted somewhat to his right. The first hour and 15 minutes he was in the stand, he twisted his head and upper body to the right to keep a close watch on the trails he expect deer to be using.

THE TRAP DOOR

Then, on one of his over-the-shoulder sweeps to the far right, the seat felt a little wobbly and seemed to have some play in it. Almost without thinking, he wiggled his backside on the seat to see what was going on, and before he could even think, the stand dropped out from under him with a loud clang, like the trap door of a hangman's platform at the moment of justice.

He instantly released the grip on his rifle as he grabbed and clawed for a hand-hold. His rifle clattered 20 feet down, bouncing off the broken tree stand and into the muddy leaf litter. As Jody's body began to fall, the safety strap attached to his harness reached the end of its travel with a bone-jarring jolt that almost knocked the wind out of him.

Luckily, Jody was still attached to the tree and alive with no apparent broken bones, but his back was against the trunk and the stick ladder was on the opposite side of the tree trunk and unreachable.

KEEP A LEVEL HEAD

As the initial shock and panic began

to subside, he looked around to assess what options he might have. He had a knife on his belt that could be used to cut the safety strap loose if needed, and he had his cell phone secured in a jacket pocket if he had to call for help. As his mind cleared, he focused on a tall, skinny hardwood sapling right in front of him, a short distance away, originally left in place as cover for the stand. He realized it just might be the best ticket out of this dangerous predicament.

By swinging his legs and arms, he managed to hook some limbs and pull the skinny trunk of the sapling close enough to gain a foothold. In spite of the trunk swinging like a pendulum, he was finally able to maneuver himself upward about a foot, which created enough slack in the harness strap to enable him to eventually wriggle it free and get it to release from the tree strap.

Once free, he slowly, carefully shimmed down the skinny tree trunk to the ground. Jody was shaken, bruised and sore, but nothing was broken. He was extremely lucky, having learned a valuable lesson about checking and testing every single tree-stand strap before the season starts every year. Any and all

SAFETY FIRST:

Thinking back over my 48 or so years in the white-tail woods, several close calls come to mind. I was extremely lucky in all of my tree stand incidents, having had no severe or lasting injuries, but "luck" is not a plan. I can only wonder now, how razor-thin might the actual margin have been between serious injury, permanent paralysis or even death? This collective passion of ours is inherently dangerous on multiple levels, so we should always think ahead and practice safety first.

straps that show any sign of deterioration should be replaced. Never get into a tree stand that has any potential mechanical issue or has not been thoroughly inspected beforehand. We can all learn something from this story and from Jody's good fortune. ■



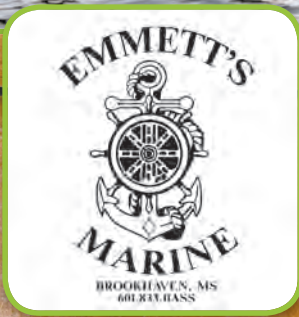
Bill Garbo is a petroleum engineer and avid whitetail hunter from Madison, Miss. He has lived and hunted out west and taken numerous big game species, but hunting big old mature southern whitetail bucks is his favorite pursuit by a country mile.



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BOMBER'S JOINTED WAKE MINNOW

BASS, REDFISH SMASH NEW TOPWATER

Russell Garner remembers the days in South Texas and elsewhere along the Gulf Coast when anglers modified jointed Redfins to make a “wake” bait that redfish found hard to resist.

Anglers would heat the lip and bend it down toward the back end of the body so the Redfin wouldn't go as deep, he said.

The practice eventually spread to the point the modification was used to catch bass and stripers in inland lakes, he said.

Garner wanted to give anglers a “wake” bait right out of the package. So he started kicking around the idea seriously about five years ago. The Bomber Jointed Wake Minnow, two years in the making, hit the market in April 2017.

“I think it'll be a great bait. This spring will be its first real heavily distributed spring, and I anticipate hearing good stories as topwater gets to be more of a deal. Topwater's always fun,” Garner said.

He's proud of the artificial lure's look and action. It wasn't easy, he confided.

“It's pretty complicated ... more difficult than building a deep-diving crank bait. It took us two years to get there, to get to the finish line,” he said.

At times during the design of a new artificial lure, he said, physics don't allow the designer to get the product to do what they want it to do. In this case, the challenge was making a waking bait with

an open cavity (air) in the body, he said. Solving that problem included weighting the artificial lure so that it performed as desired, as well as positioning the lip at the optimum angle.

“Obviously, to get it to swim, you've got to get the bait lip right under the water,” he said.

Durability was another factor in design. “You've got to make it strong enough to put up with big fish. It's made pretty stout,” he said. “Redfish will tear something up if you don't build it right.

“This bait is a wake minnow, jointed, and has incredible action. With it being jointed like this, we've got it working just right.”

GREAT WAKING ACTION

The PRADCO Fishing brand manager and veteran artificial lure designer won't get an argument from Jimmy Mason of Rogersville, Ala., — a bass pro who praises the Bomber Jointed Wake Minnow. He started throwing prototypes more than a year ago and provided input for the design.

Mason, 45, believes strongly in the finished product. It's put keeper-sized bass in the boat for him at tournament time, and he's caught redfish with it along the Alabama Gulf Coast.

His most productive tournament outing

with the lure was during a Bassmaster Open in April at Chickamauga Lake.

“It's a neat bait and it's got such a great waking action. A lot of the bites are pretty aggressive. I'm using a long rod with a soft tip to help land that,” he said.

For years, Mason caught bass on a Bomber Long-A. It was one of his go-to baits when he started fishing Bassmaster Open tournaments in 2003 and, later, for a few years, Bassmaster Elites (and the Top150s that preceded the Elites). Now he focuses on Bassmaster Opens.

“I mean, I love the Long-A,” he said. “(But) you've got to fish it painstakingly slow on the retrieve, on a spinning rod with light braid, 15-pound braid.

“The Bomber Jointed Wake Minnow, you can fish on heavier tackle and you can fish a little faster,” he said. “I use up to 20-pound test Vicious Ultimate Co-Polymer line and a lot of times a 7-foot-10 baitcasting rod. You don't have to fight it going under and losing that waking action.

“It has more-aggressive waking action than the Long-A, and it has a loud rattle on it. At the same time you can slow it down and get a very similar action to a Long-A.”

He takes advantage of the 5/8-inch, 3/4-ounce artificial lure's capabilities. It has a 3D body and 3D eyes, a raised gill plate on the side and HD decoration to

Jimmy Mason holds up a 6-pound bass caught on a Bomber Jointed Wake Minnow at Wilson Lake.

go along with sturdy hardware and No.2 black nickel treble hooks.

"You don't use it for a target casting bait. I make as long of casts as I can," he said, noting it draws suspended bass up from timber, the tops of trees and grass beds that haven't reached the surface. With the prespawn and spawn the order of the day as you read this in March, Mason knows from experience that on clear lakes the bigger females "kind of suspend on points and deep pockets before they go into the pockets (or shallows at the back end of creeks) to spawn." The Bomber Jointed Wake Minnow gets those fish to bite consistently, he said.

AVAILABLE COLORS

The lure is available in colors popular for saltwater and freshwater species, he said. Tennessee shad, bone flash, chrome/black and chrome/blue are among the favorites for bass, while mullet, chartreuse herring and gold/orange

are some of the favorites for saltwater gamefish like redfish and speckled trout. Of course, some anglers might prefer a freshwater color for saltwater purposes, and vice versa.

Mason's choice is bone flash for large-mouth and smallmouth bass, and his backup is Tennessee shad.

"When I fish, I have both tied on. If I had to pick one, I'd pick bone flash. It's a catcher," he said.

For more information on the Bomber Jointed Wake Minnow and other PRADCO Fishing products call 800-531-1202 or go to www.pradcooutdoorbrands.com. ■



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

ASTRO TABLES

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

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

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

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

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2018 MAR					BEST DAYS				LUNAR PERIODS					
POOR	FAIR	GOOD	EXCL	VALUE	MOON RISE	PRIMARY MOON OVERHEAD	MOON SET	PRIMARY MOON UNDERFOOT						
Thu 1	█	█	█	78	5:59 pm	11:19 pm - Midnight	6:33 am	10:43 am - 1:39 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○ FULL
Fri 2	█	█	█	67	7:06 pm	Midnight - 2:01 am	7:14 am	11:44 am - 2:26 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Sat 3	█	█	█	53	8:10 pm	12:19 am - 2:45 am	7:51 am	12:44 pm - 3:10 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Sun 4	█	█	█	40	9:13 pm	1:18 am - 3:26 am	8:26 am	1:43 pm - 3:51 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Mon 5	█	█	█	31	10:13 pm	2:14 am - 4:06 am	9:01 am	2:39 pm - 4:31 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Tue 6	█	█	█	28	11:11 pm	3:08 am - 4:46 am	9:36 am	3:33 pm - 5:11 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Wed 7	█	█	█	25		4:01 am - 5:27 am	10:12 am	4:26 pm - 5:52 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Thu 8	█	█	█	28	12:08 am	4:53 am - 6:09 am	10:51 am	5:18 pm - 6:34 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Fri 9	█	█	█	37	1:03 am	5:44 am - 6:52 am	11:32 am	6:09 pm - 7:17 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○ HALF
Sat 10	█	█	█	25	1:55 am	6:33 am - 7:39 am	12:17 pm	6:58 pm - 8:04 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○ LOW
Sun 11	█	█	█	19	3:44 am	8:21 am - 9:27 am	2:05 pm	8:46 pm - 9:52 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○ APOGEE & DST
Mon 12	█	█	█	19	4:30 am	9:08 am - 10:16 am	2:56 pm	9:33 pm - 10:41 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Tue 13	█	█	█	19	5:13 am	9:54 am - 11:06 am	3:49 pm	10:19 pm - 11:31 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Wed 14	█	█	█	32	5:52 am	10:36 am - 11:58 am	4:45 pm	11:01 pm - 12:23 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Thu 15	█	█	█	44	6:29 am	11:17 am - 12:49 pm	5:42 pm	11:42 pm - Midnight	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Fri 16	█	█	█	57	7:04 am	11:57 am - 1:43 pm	6:41 pm	Midnight - 1:14 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Sat 17	█	█	█	67	7:38 am	12:35 pm - 2:37 pm	7:40 pm	12:22 am - 2:08 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○ NEW
Sun 18	█	█	█	60	8:12 am	1:15 pm - 3:31 pm	8:41 pm	1:00 am - 3:02 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Mon 19	█	█	█	53	8:46 am	2:56 pm - 4:27 pm	9:43 pm	1:40 am - 3:56 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Tue 20	█	█	█	47	9:22 am	3:36 pm - 5:26 pm	10:46 pm	2:20 am - 4:52 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○ Spring
Wed 21	█	█	█	45	10:01 am	3:22 pm - 6:24 pm	11:51 pm	3:01 am - 5:51 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Thu 22	█	█	█	48	10:44 am	4:11 pm - 7:23 pm		3:47 am - 6:49 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Fri 23	█	█	█	55	11:32 am	5:04 pm - 8:24 pm	12:55 am	4:36 am - 7:48 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○ HIGH
Sat 24	█	█	█	67	12:26 pm	6:01 pm - 9:23 pm	1:58 am	5:29 am - 8:49 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○ HALF
Sun 25	█	█	█	58	1:26 pm	7:01 pm - 10:21 pm	2:58 am	6:26 am - 9:48 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Mon 26	█	█	█	50	2:29 pm	8:03 pm - 11:15 pm	3:53 am	7:26 am - 10:46 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○ Perigee
Tue 27	█	█	█	47	3:35 pm	9:04 pm - 12:06 am	4:43 am	8:28 am - 11:40 am	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Wed 28	█	█	█	57	4:42 pm	10:04 pm - 12:54 am	5:28 am	9:29 am - 12:31 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Thu 29	█	█	█	65	5:48 pm	11:04 pm - Midnight	6:08 am	10:29 am - 1:19 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Fri 30	█	█	█	72	6:52 pm	Midnight - 1:36 am	6:46 am	11:29 am - 2:01 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○
Sat 31	█	█	█	75	7:55 pm	12:02 am - 2:18 am	7:21 am	12:27 pm - 2:43 pm	☀	☾	☾	☾	☾	○ FULL

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STICKS AND STRINGS

Sammy Romano

With deer season in the rear-view mirror, take time to scout your woods for sign you might have missed last season. Inset: If you're going to change archery gear, even just your release aid, this is the time of year to get it done so you have plenty of time to prepare before next season arrives.

NO TIME BETTER THAN NOW TO PREPARE

POSTSEASON IS TIME TO CHANGE GEAR AND/OR FORM, REVIEW SUCCESS OR FAILURE, WORK ON LAND



Sammy Romano

As I write this, another year's deer season has coming to a close. For many hunters, this is a sad time of year, as thoughts of a long offseason become reality.

I've often heard it said, "Every ending is a new beginning." This is especially true when it comes to deer hunting with a bow. After the season, I like to reflect back and compile a list of things that went right or wrong. This is no different than a football team watching film to analyze its performance.

By doing this, I am able to isolate and focus on problems in my shooting form, stand placement, scent-control regimen, etc., so these errors are not repeated next season. The time to identify and correct these issues is now, not several months down the road when they are easily forgotten or overlooked.

ADJUST BOW, FORM

This past season, I struggled with a bad case of target panic, which made it very difficult to hunt with my bow. I was punching the trigger on my release aid so much that I had little confidence in my ability to make a clean kill. I switched over to my crossbow, but I am a vertical bow guy at heart.

I am already working hard to manage my target panic. By lowering my draw weight, shooting a hinge-style release aid and temporarily removing my sight, I am reducing my tendency to punch the trigger. This requires developing new muscle

memory, which takes quite a while and a lot of practice.

I don't typically take long shots at game anymore, so I have decided to start shooting heavier arrows, which should help with penetration at my new, lighter draw weight. I am also going to resume shooting fixed-blade broad heads. I never make major changes to my form or setup during the season, because it takes time to become proficient after doing either. By making these adjustments to my form and set-up now, I should be ready in plenty of time for next year's bow opener. Bowhunters who wait until just before the season to make adjustments put themselves in a bad spot.

SCOUT THE WOODS

I also noticed that a lot of deer were skirting several of my stands this past season. I made a mental note of these, and I am going to relocate these stands to take advantage of what the deer were doing.

Late winter and early spring are the best time to scout and locate stands for next year. Post-season scouting is key to understanding how deer move through and utilize any piece of property. Because it is eight months before next season, a hunter can move about the woods freely without worrying about disturbing deer. In fact, jumping a big buck from his bed will only help to pinpoint one of his bedding locations, because he will have plenty of time to settle down and get over the intrusion.

Also, with the woods barren, rubs and

scrapes are easier to spot from longer distances. Game trails are usually well-worn from heavy use, making them stand out. Most hunters have accumulated a long list of "honey-dos" that make it difficult to get into the woods after the season. Even so, I can assure you, any time spent scouting now will pay off in spades when hunting season rolls around.

Another advantage to post-season scouting is the ability to clean trees that you intend to hunt next season. I am extremely allergic to poison oak/ivy, and during the late winter/early spring these plants are dormant, making it less likely for me to have a reaction.

I try to cut a section covering several inches out of all of these vines around the base of any tree I intend to climb or hang a stand in. This way, by the time I climb the tree, the vines have withered and died. Shooting lanes are also easier to trim without the weight of leaves on limbs and branches. Just be careful not to overdo it, as the woods will look much different after green-up in late spring and thus the next fall.

By reviewing this past season, you can make adjustments to improve your odds this fall. Like most things in life, you get out of deer hunting what you put into it. Success favors the organized and prepared hunter. ■



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.

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SEAFOOD BIBLE

Jerald & Glenda Horst

CAPTAIN OF THE KITCHEN

TOMMY PELLEGRIN MIGHT CATCH FISH FOR A LIVING, BUT HIS FIRST LOVE IS COOKING.



The eyeglasses give the well-built, middle-aged man a scholarly look, but he carries an obvious outdoors veneer from years in the sun. Nothing in Capt. Tommy Pellegrin's appearance would lead one to believe he is a chef.

But the Houma charter guide has a big confession to make.

"I'd rather cook than fish. It's just easier being in the fishing business. When people get in a boat, they are getting into their happy box. In a restaurant, people are harder to please."

So he's a charter guide, and cooks for fun.

"I cook because I like to see people enjoy good food," he explained. "It's great to come up with something original ..."

"I consider myself a Cajun cook. My mother, Carolyn, and my grandmothers, Nin Pellegrin and Clara Boudreaux Carlos, were Cajun cooks from down the bayou — Bayou Dulac and Little Caillou. They cooked stews, gumbos, fried seafood, rice, white beans, red beans and soft potato salad that you put in your gumbo."

Pellegrin still cooks traditional Cajun, but has branched out into making his own original dishes and is fearless in the kitchen. "I just think of something and I cook it," he grinned.

"Both my wife and I cook, about equally. In a seven-day week, we cook five of them. On Thursdays we go out. The other day, we eat leftovers."

And he is obviously creative. He makes his own Creole seasoning and never cooks anything out of a box, including pancakes, muffins, beignets and biscuits. ■

[recipe >](#)

Balsamic Shrimp has a distinct sweet tang from the honey and the balsamic vinegar, but there is no sour component in its taste profile.

INSET: Tommy Pellegrin is a creative cook and cooks for the family often.

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SEAFOOD BIBLE

Jerald & Glenda Horst

BALSAMIC SHRIMP

The idea for this dish came to Pelligren while he was watching a television commercial in which honey balsamic vinegar was used to season chicken. "I said, 'What, I never heard of this.'"

"I had some leftover bait shrimp in my boat's livewell that I used to try this. It resembled traditional New Orleans barbequed shrimp, but had a totally different flavor spectrum. I added Creole seasoning for the salt, oil to lubricate the shrimp and for flavor, and the vinegar just for its flavor.

"This is extremely not spicy. It's flavorful

TIP!

If you can't find Guidry's Fresh Cut Creole Seasoning mix in a plastic container in the fresh produce section of the store, you can make your own, using 2¼ cups chopped onions, ½ cup chopped bell pepper, ½ cup chopped celery, 1 cup chopped green onions, ¼ cup chopped parsley and five cloves of minced garlic.

without being peppery hot. My wife, Laurie, loved it. My son Eric, who is a part-time charter guide, thought it was great. My daughter Sarah thought it was really good, but she wanted more spice, so she added cayenne pepper at the table."

Like barbequed shrimp, this dish has a lot of broth, but it isn't as thick and oily. Serve it with plenty of French bread to sop up every drop. This isn't a dish for the delicate. Dive into it with your fingers to peel the shrimp and keep a napkin handy. ■

INGREDIENTS:

3½ pounds large shrimp, head-on
¼ cup Creole seasoning
1 stick of butter, melted
¼ cup Worcestershire Sauce
2 tbsp olive oil
1 cup balsamic vinegar
1 cup dry white wine
⅔ cup honey
1 stick of butter
2 ½ cups Guidry's Fresh Cut Creole Seasoning
1 yellow bell pepper, coarsely slivered
1 red bell pepper, coarsely slivered

PREPARATION: Serves 4.

Wash the shrimp, place them in a large mixing bowl, then sprinkle them with the Creole seasoning. Mix the melted butter, Worcestershire Sauce and olive oil, and pour over the shrimp. Mix balsamic vinegar, white wine and honey in a bowl or measuring cup and stir to dissolve the honey. Pour the mixture over the shrimp and stir well to mix. Allow to marinate for 30 minutes. Melt remaining stick of butter in a heavy pot and add Guidry's seasoning and the bell peppers. Cook over high heat until the seasonings are soft, stirring often to prevent sticking. Add the shrimp and stir into the seasonings. Cover and cook on high until the mixture boils. Stir once more, reduce heat to medium-high and cook until the shells of the shrimp begin to separate from the flesh. Do not over-stir or the heads will come off the shrimp. Do not overcook. Serve with French bread to sop the juices.



Cook the seasonings for Balsamic Shrimp until they are soft.



Jerald and Glenda Horst are the authors of six excellent books on Louisiana seafood—*The Seafood Bible: Shrimp*; *The Seafood Bible: Crawfish*; *The Seafood Bible: Crabs*; *The Seafood Bible: Oysters*; *The Seafood Bible: Fish: Volume 1*; and *The Seafood Bible: Fish: Volume 2*. Jerald and Glenda may be contacted at jerald@rockinghorst.com.



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LOWA UPLANDER GTX BOOTS

Whether you're walking through open fields pursuing birds, stomping through thickets after rabbits or hiking in to your turkey blind or deer stand, you need footwear that won't let you down, no matter what the conditions are.

You want a boot that's waterproof, breathable, lightweight, comfortable, briar-proof and thorn-shedding. Those are all features that hunters long for in a pair of boots, and they're all delivered by the LOWA Uplander GTX. Originally designed as a bird-hunting shoe, hunters will find themselves lacing these up when pursuing other game as well.

GORE-TEX lines the leather uppers of these 2.64-pound pair of boots, and the open hook eyelets allow for quick lacing. The boot offers padded ankle support, and the Vibram outsole makes quick work of all types of terrain.

It feels like a sneaker, but delivers in-the-field performance only found in a high-quality hunting boot.

More Info: www.lowaboost.com



SPORTSMAN DRI-BALANCE SHIRTS

These moisture-wicking long sleeve tees look and feel like cotton, but added microfiber makes them resistant to wrinkles and quick-drying. Unlike pure poly garments that tend to retain odor even after washing, Dri-Balance garments will be odor free for the life of the garment. You'll also love how comfortable the Dri-Balance fabric makes you feel.

Sportsman Dri-Balance shirts offer sun protection SPF +30 and start at only \$19.99. Find more color and design options online.

More Info: www.sportsmangear.com



BUBBA BLADE FISHING PLIERS

By Andy Crawford

Bubba Blade has long produced top-quality filet knives, but now it's also offering fishing pliers that should be on any angler's boat.

Bubba Blade's Fishing Pliers are designed to offer maximum control, strength and durability. They come with the company's patented no-slip grip handle just like their knives, so you'll never have to worry about the tools slipping out of your hand.

But even better are the new super-tough tungsten cutters that provide dual-cutting blades. One snips braided line, and one cut hooks. If the cutter becomes grooved, you can unscrew the blades and replace them to provide longer tool life.

The pliers' stainless steel jaws are titanium bonded for strength and durability, and feature three sets of crimpers that make quick work of split shot and leader sleeves.

Bubba Blade Fishing Pliers come in a hard case and are outfitted with a lanyard.

Retail: \$54.95.

More Info: www.bubbablade.com





GAMAKATSU LIGHT HOOKS

By Andy Crawford

OK, I'll admit it: I can't fish with circle hooks. I mean the danged things take all the fun out of fishing, since setting the hook almost always results in a miss.

But there's one thing I can't take away from the hooks: Used properly, they have astounding hook-up ratios.

Gamakatsu has finally offered a hook that provides the best of both worlds in their Nautilus Light Circle Hook.

"You can still somewhat set the hook," Gamakatsu's Syd Rives said.

The Nautilus Light is a light-wire hook developed specifically for fishing fragile live bait, formed from forged high-carbon steel. A nickel-silver black finish offers superb corrosion resistance.

Other features include a straight eye and offset point for superior hooking performance.

It's ideal for live-bait and cut-bait anglers.

Of course, the shape is designed to hook and hold fish securely.

Available in 2 to 8/0 sizes. Retail from \$3.98 per pack.

More Info: www.gamakatsu.com

G. LOOMIS E6X INSHORE ROD SERIES

If you're looking for a new weapon of choice to target redfish and speckled trout this spring, the G. Loomis E6X Inshore Rod Series fills the bill — and then some.

The E6X Series offers both performance and value, and features a lineup of 11 spinning and five casting models with either moderate fast, fast, extra fast or magnum moderate fast actions.

All the rods feature G. Loomis' Multi-Taper Technology, where designers focus on swing weight — the proper rod balance needed to fish 'tip up' or 'tip down' techniques.

"Proper balance lets anglers concentrate on what is happening on the end of the line, rather than the tip of the rod," said G. Loomis' Bruce Holt. "With the E6X series and the G. Loomis Multi-Taper

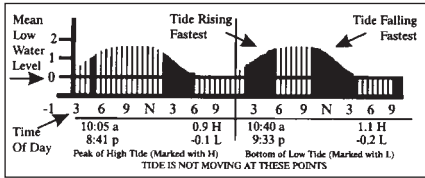
Technology behind them, we can provide light, sensitive, yet powerful rods for all types of inshore saltwater techniques — what anglers know and have come to expect from G. Loomis — and all at a very comfortable price."

Rods range from \$189 to \$239, with numerous technique-specific models designed to tightline live bait, fish soft plastics, throw a popping cork, work a topwater lure and even catch larger species like tarpon, cobia, small groupers and sharks.

They're available at Academy Sports and Outdoors — check them out here: www.academy.com/shop/pdp/g-loomis-e6x-inshore-saltwater-casting-rod.



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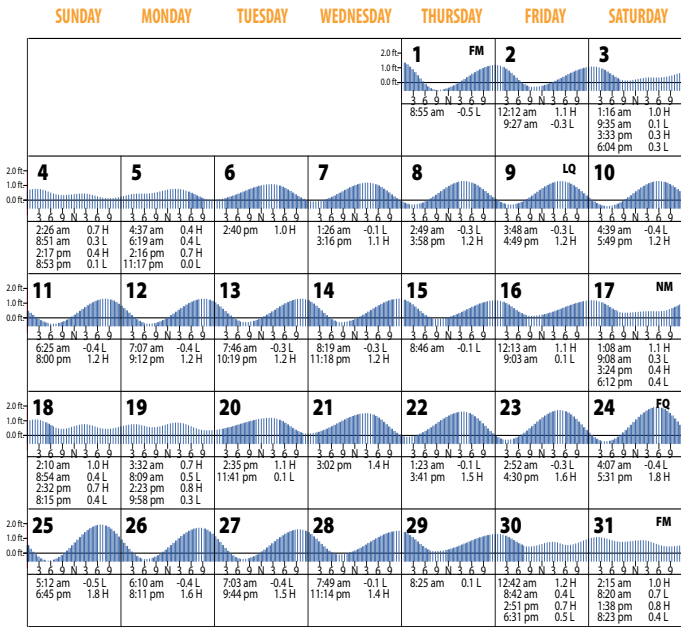


How to use the **SPORTSMAN** Tide Guide

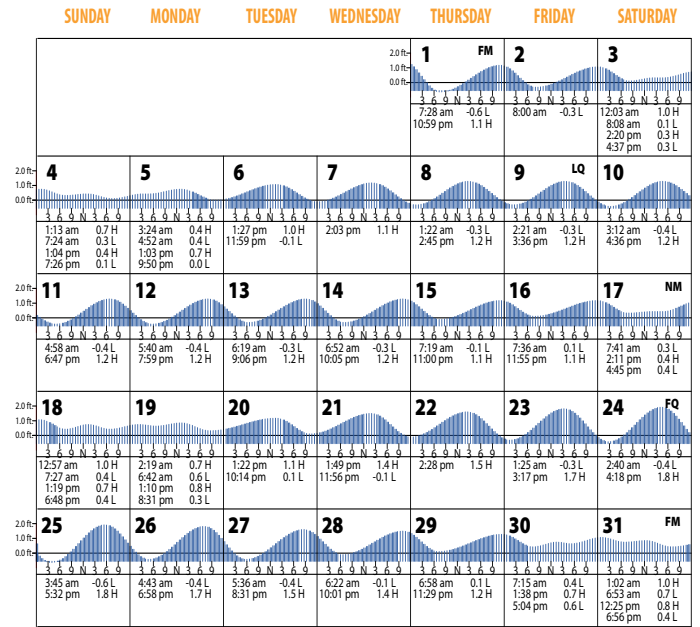
Fish feed most actively when the tide is moving. The Mississippi Sportsman has made it simple to spot the most active feeding periods each day in the TIDE GUIDE. Just fish those times indicated in black.

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

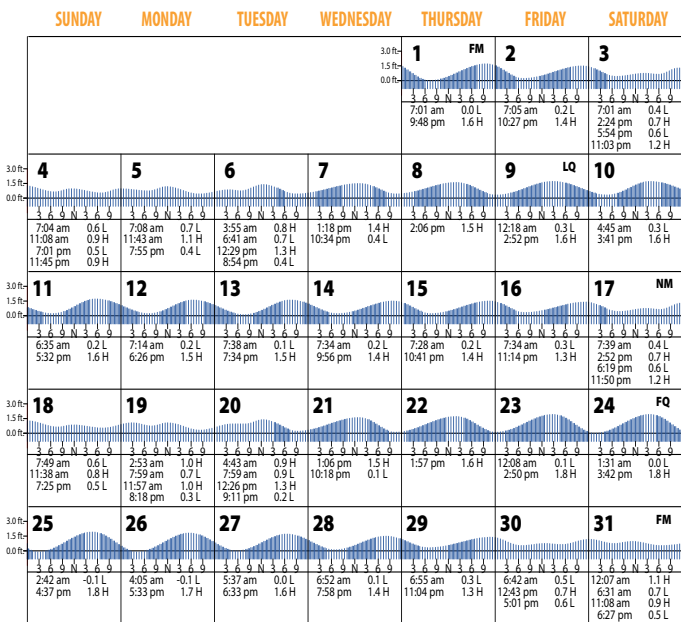
Bay St. Louis Entrance



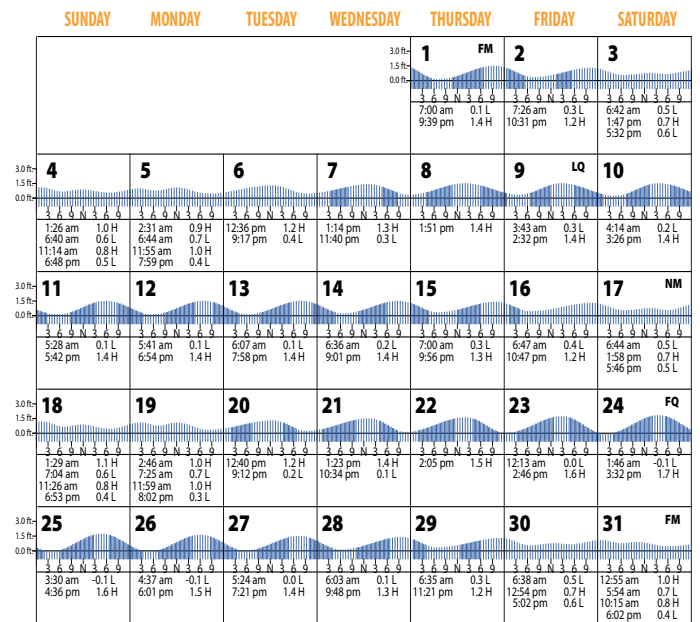
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