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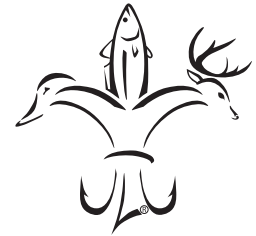
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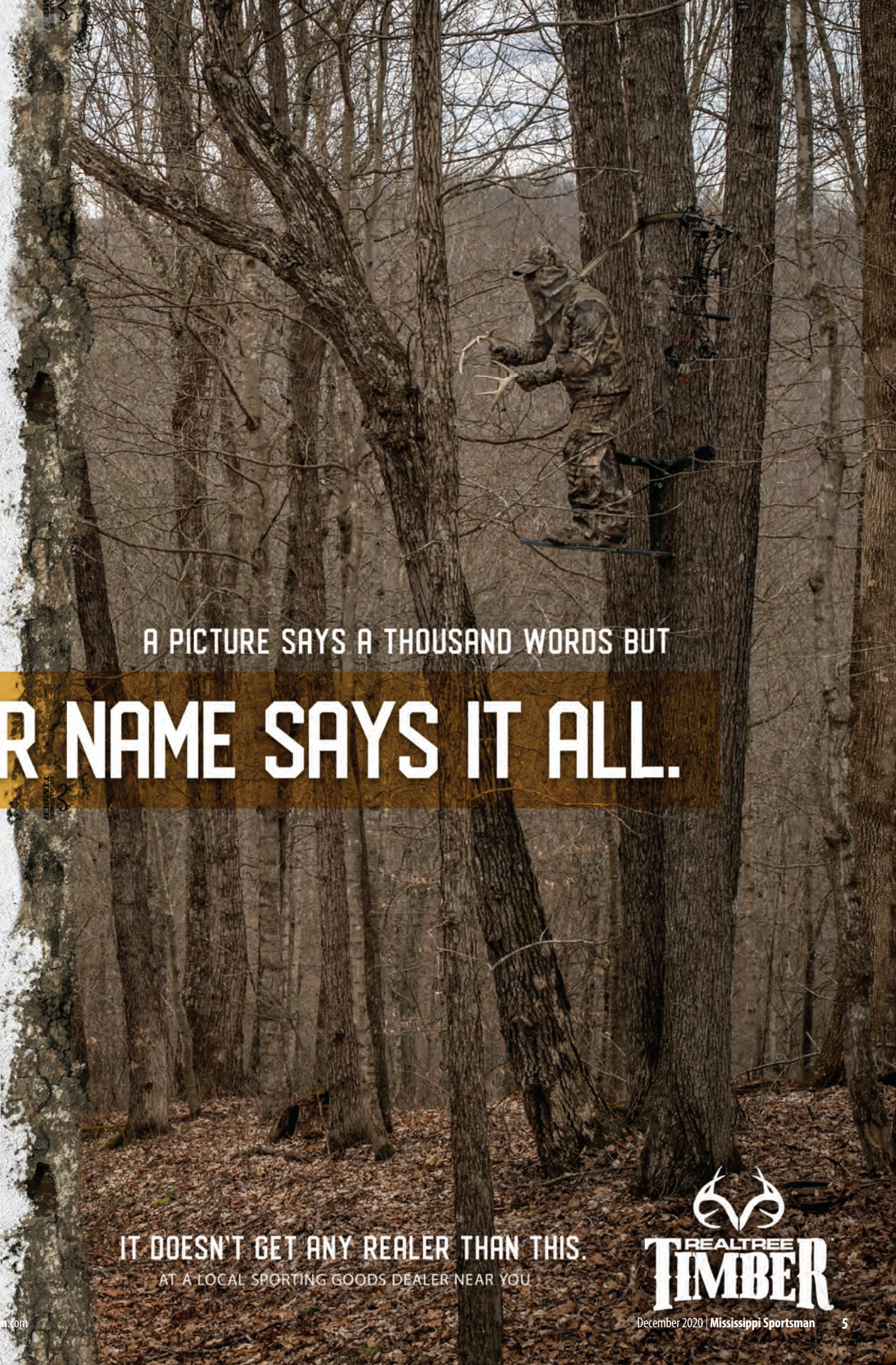
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Outdoor UPDATE with Bobby Cleveland

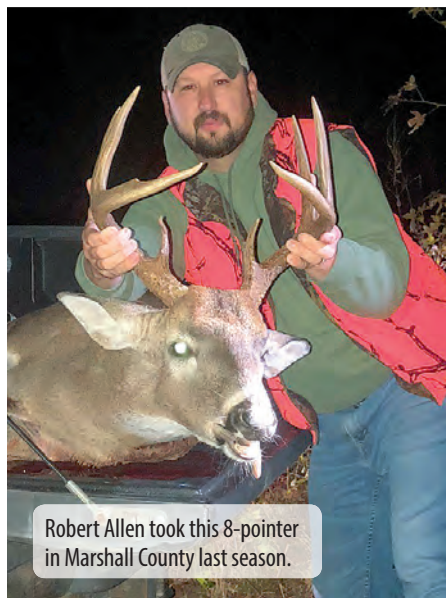


Bobby Cleveland has covered sports in Mississippi for over 38 years. A native of Hattiesburg and graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi, Cleveland lives on Ross Barnett Reservoir near Jackson with his wife Pam. He can be reached at bobbyc7754@yahoo.com.

HALLELUJAH! 2020'S ABOUT GONE

LET'S SEND OUT A YEAR TO FORGET WITH SOME GOOD MEMORIES, MEALS

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Just 31 more days, and we can put behind us 2020, the year that most will view as the worst in history. So why don't we go out with a bang? Mississippi sportsmen sure have that opportunity.



Robert Allen took this 8-pointer in Marshall County last season.

December not only brings us the joyous holiday season, but also the peak of hunting season. With the exception of wild turkeys and frogs, every game animal native to Mississippi can be legally harvested this month.

Of course, deer top the list, but there's also rabbit and squirrel, raccoon and bobcat, rails, gallinule, dove, duck, geese, crow, woodcock and, yes, even snipe.

And, when it's too hot to think about sitting in a deer stand or a duck blind, fishing fills the bill. December is among the best

on the calendar when it comes to producing action on the water. Crappie are pretty predictable, bass can't be beat, catfish are always curious and panfish can be plucked from the pond bottoms. Offshore, reds and specks move closer to the shoreline, black (puppy) drum and sheepshead stack on the pilings, and even flounder find shallow homes.

So, what's it going to be for Christmas dinner? Store-bought, or perhaps a loin of venison or a pot of Mulligan stew? Maybe a pile of fried fish fillets or a big pot of court bullion? Duck and sausage gumbo?

This issue of *Mississippi Sportsman* can help make that happen. Our team of writers have put together a list of features and commentaries to help you set that table.

- David Hawkins looks at the countless acres of habitat for puddle ducks and tells us why and how hunters can take full advantage.
- Mike Giles talks to some female hunters who have become experts at taking deer, and they share advice that can help all hunters.
- Phillip Gentry takes us to the Mississippi River, where cold-weather fishing requires a different approach to keep putting fish in the box.
- Jonathan LePera talks to a pro bass fisherman to discuss finesse fishing, a tactic that often works in the winter, when downsizing lures is required for fickle fish.
- Kinny Haddox shares the cold-water tactics that pro crappie teams us to put fresh fish on the table at Christmas.

There's lots more inside this issue, including our best wishes for the holidays and beyond.

Be smart, be safe and let's all have a happy new year! ■

RUT MAP ANSWERS LOTS OF QUESTIONS FOR DEER HUNTERS

So, when exactly is the rut? Without doubt, the most frequently asked question by deer hunters each year is when they can expect the rut, which is kind of interesting since it happens at the same time, like clockwork, each year.

It might vary a day or two, but not much more. We can talk moon phases, weather and herd ratios and how that impacts when lovesick bucks will start chasing does, but biologists always return the conversation back to one factor: photoperiod.

Simply put, photoperiod is the amount of daylight received by an organism during a 24-hour period. Winter has the shortest photoperiod of any season. Decreased amounts of natural daylight impacts all mammals, because there is lower production of serotonin and, in turn, melatonin in the pineal gland.

In animals, melatonin is involved in the synchronization of the circadian rhythms, including sleep-wake timing, blood-pressure regulation, seasonal reproduction and many other functions.

It's the "seasonal reproduction" part of that explanation that should get a deer hunter's attention.

It is photoperiod that puts does into estrus. It is estrus that triggers a doe's pheromones and a doe's pheromones that capture a buck's attention, which is already on high alert because of the photoperiod's impact on his testosterone production.

Put that together, plus some physical activity we won't explain here, and it not only produces fawns but also better opportunities for hunters to find even the most sly, mature — and trophy — bucks with their guards down and their noses up. Photoperiod, more than any other factor, puts trophies on the wall.

Because the Gregorian calendar is based on the solar seasons, photoperiods do not change much during a deer's lifetime. That's how biologists at the Mississippi Department of Wildlife,

Fisheries and Parks were able to compile, for lack of a better term, a rut map. The agency's long-winded terminology for it is Mississippi's White-tailed Deer Simulated Mean Conception Date Map, and it can be found at <https://www.mdwfp.com/wildlife-hunting/deer-program/deer-breeding-date-map/>.

DECEMBER DEER SEASONS

Gun with dogs: Season ends Dec. 1.

Primitive weapons: Dec. 2-Dec. 15.

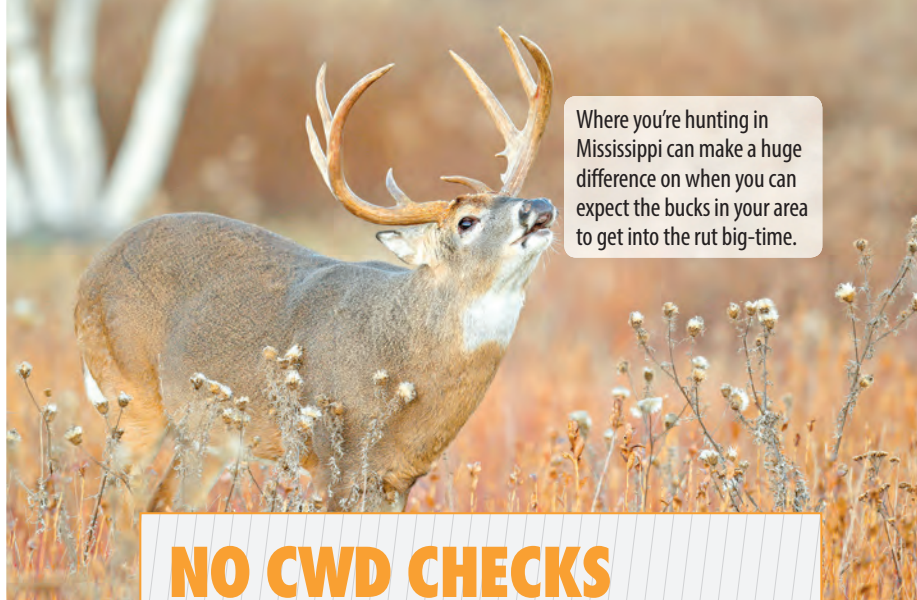
Weapon of choice on private lands only.

Gun without dogs: Dec. 16-Dec. 23.

Gun with dogs: Dec. 24-Jan. 20.

Dates are the same for all deer zones of Mississippi. Harvest is either-sex on private lands statewide but is limited to legal bucks only on public lands unless otherwise posted.

The map provides hunters with the dates when most does conceive. It varies widely, from early December in northwest Mississippi to February in southeast Mississippi.



Where you're hunting in Mississippi can make a huge difference on when you can expect the bucks in your area to get into the rut big-time.

NO CWD CHECKS

Mississippi has no mandatory check-in dates for chronic wasting disease in December but will resume with nine Southwest Mississippi counties Jan. 2-3 and 15 counties in Southeast Mississippi Jan. 16-17. For counties and stations, visit <https://www.mdwfp.com/wildlife-hunting/chronic-wasting-disease/mandatory-sampling-days/>.

Hunters are urged to voluntarily check in deer in December to test for chronic wasting disease. The MDWFP has a statewide system of check stations. To learn about your nearest location and how to participate including preparing deer, visit <https://www.mdwfp.com/wildlife-hunting/chronic-wasting-disease/sample-collection/>.

"I found it a valuable tool when I graduated from college and moved from Hattiesburg to Southaven," said Jimmy Roberts, 33. "I had hunted in southwest Mississippi my whole life until I was 22, and then I moved up here, and things were totally different. I had no clue, but I heard a biologist speak at a workshop, and after it, he told me about the map on the website; I found it.

"Bucks were rutting up here a month or two earlier than I'd ever seen. They always rutted in late January on the public lands I hunted south of Hattiesburg, and it was always the week between Christmas and the New Year over around Fayette.

"I remember when I was growing up, as soon as we finished Christmas dinner, Dad would have my brother and I getting our stuff ready to go to deer camp the next day. We hunted every day, because Daddy knew that week was the peak of the rut. What that biologist said about amount of daylight that day in the workshop made so much sense to me, because year in and year out, we always went to camp on Dec. 26."

Roberts did add a caveat to his story.

"I understand that the photoperiod dictates the cycles, but I also know that other factors during that breeding period can be important," he said. "The colder the better, and I still like a full moon on no moon to fall right in the middle. I've got no science to back either the weather or the lunar phases, only results. The only two bucks I've ever had mounted — a 162-inch and a 151 — came during the peak of the rut when it was freezing, the (151) on a new moon, and the 162 on a full moon.

"Would I have killed them on a warm day on any other moon phase? Who knows, and I might well have. My lesson was to know when the rut was about to happen and be there when it does." ■

DOVES: THIRD TIME'S A CHARM

Diehard dove hunters throughout Mississippi always look to December and the third and final segment of the season for some of the year's best wing-shooting. This month, they get plenty of opportunities.

The South Zone reopens on Dec. 19 and runs through Jan. 31. The North Zone reopens Dec. 23 and closes Jan. 8.

"I wish we had more time and could hunt later in January in the North Zone, but I'm happy to get what we have," said Phillip Jordan of Grenada. "We get a lot of the migratory doves, those big fat suckers from the midwestern corn fields, that don't get in to the Delta until mid- to late December, and man, that provides some great shooting, because food sources are limited at that time, and if you can find one or provide a legal one, you can concentrate the birds and go to town."

South Mississippi hunters need the later dates, too.

"I've always believed that the birds we get down here in December are the native birds from the Mississippi Delta, and probably some of the midwestern birds, too," said Jake Phillips of Natchez. "We don't get the great shooting that the North Delta gets in the first two seasons, but we make up for it in the winter.



A mixture of resident and migratory doves makes for some great late-season shooting across Mississippi.

This year, getting to hunt all the way through Jan. 31 is a blessing. We can deer or duck hunt in the morning and late evening and fit a mid-day or early afternoon dove hunt in between. It ought to be fun." ■

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NEW BARNETT DRAWDOWN OKAY'D

Anglers fishing on Mississippi's busiest waters, Barnett Reservoir near Jackson, will find a lower water level from the start of December through the end of February under a new operational schedule approved by the board of directors of the Pearl River Valley Water Supply District, a state agency that oversees the 33,000-acre lake.

"We will target a lake level of 296 (feet above sea level) during the winter months, down from the 297.5 we've targeted since 2012," said John Sigman, general manager of PRVWSD. "If you remember, from the early 80s through 2012, we had a seasonal drawdown every winter. Our target then was 296, so this is nothing new.

"As we saw last year, when we had brought the lake down to assist in our battle against the invasive giant Salvinia vegetation in Pelahatchie Bay, it provided valuable storage space to help mitigate flooding downriver during a high-water event in February. We weren't able to keep water out of all the houses in Jackson, but we were able to keep the numbers down in the low hundreds instead of thousands."

The flood of 2020 saw the second-highest in-flow totals into the lake in its 55-year history, behind only the catastrophic 1979 Easter Flood. It surprised forecasters when it exceeded the 1983 flood, yet the number of houses impacted was far fewer.

"We felt like bringing the lake down to 296 was the right thing to do," Sigman said. "We will start bringing it down to 296 on Dec. 1, although nature might do it for us earlier. We are heading into mid-November already low to a lack of rain and very little in the long-term forecast. We will start bringing back up to normal pool on March 1."

Sigman said the lowering also provides more opportunity to continue battling against Salvinia and other invasive vegetation.

Bass fishermen see another side benefit, too.

"I like to see them bring it down," said Kenny Churchill of Brandon. "I thought it was always good for the fish, and I know it was good for me. Just seems like the bass always were more numerous and healthier back when we had the drawdowns in the winter. You have to pay more attention to where you are running

when the lake is down, but I think it's worth it."

Crappie fishermen agree with Churchill's assessment.

"It might take us a few trips to figure out what depth the fish will like in the winter, but that's okay," said James Carson of Pearl. "Fish will be even more concentrated in the deeper areas that still have baitfish. Back 10 to 15 years ago, I remember having some of the best days of crappie fishing in my life with my uncle.

"He loved to fish over off Brown's Landing in that old lakebed that starts just off the ramp. He had this one stretch of trees on the edge of that lake that always held fish back then. I just hope I can remember which ones they are or find them. I remember 14 feet being the magic depth. With modern electronics, if they're there, finding them will be so much easier. My uncle, Jack, he has passed, and I wonder what he'd think if he saw how easy it is to locate fish. He had to do it the hard way and boy could he ever do it. He loved to get the boat in the water when he had to break ice at the ramp to launch. We always caught them." ■

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Mississippi anglers will find crappie-fishing prospects great this month on Ross Barnett Reservoir and Eagle Lake.



FIVE MISSISSIPPI HOLIDAY HOTSPOTS

TAKE SOME TIME AWAY FROM THE DEER STAND THIS MONTH, SAMPLE SOME MAGNOLIA STATE GEMS

While Mississippi is loaded with great cold-water fishing holes, these five are proven hot spots that are worth a visit during December.

BARNETT RESERVOIR CRAPPIE

This 33,000-acre lake is known for its winter production, although fewer fishermen fish the lake in winter than in other months due to deer season being open. The hottest action is the edge of the river channel near the Mississippi Hwy 43 bridge, both upstream and downstream. The concentrated current flowing under the bridge is a natural funnel that provides crappie a seemingly endless supply of shad on which to feed. Mixing a jig tipped with a minnow into the food supply is just too good for them to overlook. The edges of old lake beds on the Madison County side of the main lake are also very productive in the winter, since they provide deep cover.

US 90 BRIDGE AT BAY ST. LOUIS

This 3.3-mile bridge was rebuilt after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the previous structure in 2005. The new bridge is a fishing haven thanks to larger pilings along its length. Guides love it since it makes for easy trip, with a short ride and increased odds of filling the fish box quickly. Redfish, sheepshead and black drum (puppy drum) are the primary targets, and dead bait shrimp is all that is needed. Pitch the bait as close to a piling as possible and hold on. When you hit a hot piling, the bite is automatic and usually only takes a second or two.

MISSISSIPPI RIVER CATFISH

The Big Muddy can produce a lot of action and lot of fish fries

in the winter. Locate deep holes that don't have a lot of current running through them and work around the holes with skipjack herring or shad baits. Keep your baits suspended off the bottom from a few inches to a foot or two, and use enough weight to keep them in place.

TRACE STATE PARK BASS

When this lake reopened in the fall, it began producing big fish almost immediately because it still had some of its residual resident bass in the lake. Unlike many lakes in the MDWFP's state lakes system, Trace's unique design allowed the lake to be drawn down to repair the dam and water structure without emptying the lake completely. The bass and other species that remained were protected for more than two years, which lessened their instincts and fear of lures. Like other MDWFP lakes drawn down for repair, the lake was also restocked. As those fish grow and join the holdovers, the fishing will only get better. A shaky-head worm can be very effective.

EAGLE LAKE CRAPPIE

It's hard to leave this old Mississippi River oxbow off the list, though it has given up some of its reputation to other waters like Grenada Lake and Lake Washington. But for more than a century, this lake has produced crappie consistently from one year to the next. A mixed population of white and black crappie is one of the reasons. Locals like to fish the open waters for suspended white crappie in the winter but fish the piers on the outside bend of the lake — the Mississippi side — to net the big black crappie. Either way, give it a shot and enjoy the day, ■



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Ryleigh Stokes

Ryleigh Stokes, 4, caught this 6-pound bass using a Barbie spinning reel, bream hook and cricket.



Luke Smith

Luke Smith proudly displays his 9-point Desoto County buck.



Pierson Vance

Pierson Vance took his first buck with a Barnett crossbow over the opening weekend of deer season near Clinton.



Jackson Allen with his first deer ever, a 6-point, killed in Marshall County.

Jackson Allen

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MDMR CERTIFIES NEW YOUTH STATE RECORD

From News Reports

The Mississippi Department of Marine Resources certified a youth state fishing record for the month of October. Rodie Lane Armes, 10, of Pass Christian, set the new youth state record for needlefish, *Strongylura marina*, using conventional tackle with a fish weighing 2.56 ounces.

"Rodie continues to add more state fishing records to his resume, and we are proud of him for a job well done," said Joe Spraggins, executive director of the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources.



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TEEN GOES EXPERT ON GREAT ADAMS COUNTY 12-POINT

By Bobby Cleveland

James Meriwether's story of how he killed a 152-inch, 12-point trophy buck on Oct. 10 is befitting a veteran, experienced, learned deer hunter.

It's certainly not that of a 17-year-old junior at Natchez Cathedral High School who has only been bowhunting three full seasons. But to his credit, the teen had a great game plan, called the right audibles and then executed it with near precision.

"I am very excited about this experience," Meriwether said. "It all came together, then it changed, and then I figured it out and was successful. I has so happy because I've had a goal of taking a trophy buck over 130 inches, and I did it."

The buck he was hunting had been captured it on camera many times since July on his family's property in Adams County. He was hunting about 1,000 yards behind his house.

"I started getting good pictures of him, steady, like every day, in mid- to late July," Meriwether said. "He was there about every day, and I had him patterned pretty good, but the week before the opening of archery season, he disappeared. For three or four days, I stopped getting photos. I thought, 'That's about right: find a giant deer, learn all about him, and then he disappears right before opening day.'"

STRATEGY CHANGE

Meriwether was disappointed and was getting very worried, until...

"Then he started showing back up on cameras, but only in a totally different area," he said. "I think he showed back up

either the night before the season opener or the night after it opened. He went nocturnal and switched sides of the property.

He had been showing up every day at daylight, but after disappearing, he was only moving at night, and I caught him on a different camera. Before he disappeared, he had his velvet. When he reappeared, it was gone."

Everything Meriwether knew about the buck was no longer useful.

"I had to change my pattern completely, but I did figure out where he was going," he said. "I had a stand on a small food plot in an oak bottom with a cluster of oak trees that were dropping (acorns). I had a stand where he was going, but I had to change the setup where he was at.

"The first weekend of the season, I hunted him Saturday, Sunday and Monday but didn't see him."

THE WAITING GAME

Back to school he went, but the next Saturday, Oct. 10, he was back in the game.

"That's the day after the hurricane that came through," he said. "We didn't have any photos of the deer feeding for several days as the storm came through, so I



James Meriwether, 17, killed this 152-inch trophy with bow and arrow on Oct. 10 in Adams County.

figured they'd be coming out early in daylight looking for something to eat.

"I went to the stand that afternoon, and I thought the wind was right for that stand. The wind was blowing about 6 or 7 miles an hour, not too bad, but as I walked in, I noticed it was swirling. I knew I couldn't hunt that stand. I got a chair and carried it in to sit on the ground."

This was a risky move, for sure. All the cull bucks and does he had killed with a bow, he had killed from an elevated ladder stand.

"But I had practiced shooting this way just because I knew it could happen — maybe not on this buck, but eventually," said Meriwether, who arrived early, checked the wind and had a good idea which side of the small plot with acorns the deer would enter.

"I wasn't sure which trail he'd use, but I was pretty sure what side he'd go to," he said. "I put the chair in a hole in some thick kudzu among a few trees. I was pretty well hidden. I sat down and waited."

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

About 30 minutes before the end of legal shooting hours, Meriwether saw a group of bucks approaching on a trail that entered the plot about 25 to 30 yards from his stand.

"They started feeding, and a couple of minutes later, two more small bucks walked into the field," he said. "About two minutes later, here came the big buck. He had been hanging back, watching the others to make sure it was clear."

The problem Meriwether faced was having 10 eyes within 30 yards of his hiding place.

"It did make it difficult, but eventually, everything got right," Meriwether said. "He walked closer to me than the other bucks, and it took, I guess, about 5 minutes from when he walked out until he turned broadside and for me to be sure the other bucks were not looking. Honestly, I don't think any of them even knew I was there until I took the shot."

Using a single pin set at 25 yards, the distance he had figured the shot would be, Meriwether took aim behind the shoulder and hit the release.

"I hit him pretty good, but what I couldn't really tell was that he was slightly quartered toward me," he said. "I hit right where I aimed and clipped a lung, but the arrow exited further back through the stomach."

"I got decent blood in the field, and then it got better and better the further I went for about 100 yards," Meriwether said. "That he had gone that far worried me, so I decided to go a little further and then back out."

LOCATING THE BIG BUCK

He "speed-walked" the 1,000 yards home and enlisted the aid of his father, William, and brother, Liam. They waited another 20 to 30 minutes and then returned to the search.

"We walked another 100 yards or so and still had decent blood, and I was really getting worried then about the shot," he said. "Then I came up out of a ditch bottom and walked up on a flat and jumped him. I saw the guts hanging out as he ran away. Dad, Liam and I decided to back out, and Dad said he had a friend who had a friend with good trailing dogs.

He called him, and at about 10:30, the man came with a dog, and he walked right to the buck. That was one of the neatest parts of the whole deal, too, seeing how good that dog worked."


The buck fell about 300 yards from where it was originally hit.

The buck was a main-frame 8-point with a huge extra tine that stuck out forward and upward from the right base.

"We didn't know if it was a split brow tine or another main beam," Meriwether said. "Really, I don't care. It's just a beautiful buck with that odd point and two stickers on his right G2 and another sticker on the left G2. It made him a 12-point."

"The taxidermist, Tucker Crisp, that scored him said it had unusually short main beams, only 20 inches on both sides. Tucker said most bucks in that area that size would be 23, 24 or 25 inches.

That cost me some scoring, but believe me, I don't really care about that. My goal was to kill a big trophy buck, and I did it." ■



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STARS ALIGN FOR YOUNG DEER HUNTER

By Kinny Haddox

Sometimes, the stars just align and, if you are ready, it's just your time. It's called preparation meets opportunity.

That's the way it worked out for 15-year-old Gray Worthey of Choudrant, La., on Oct. 2 when he arrowed a huge, 14-point Hogue Island buck that scored 170. The deer weighed 240 pounds and was estimated to be 6½ years old. Worthey shot it the opening week of bow season. It was only his third deer to kill with a bow and by far the largest.

The final meeting between Worthey and the big buck wasn't by chance. He had been watching the monster in trail-camera photos since it was in velvet this past summer. He, his father and brother had seen the deer in previous seasons, but over this past year, the buck just blew up in size.

Because Worthey, his father, Jim, and brother, Jed, had been quarantined at their hunting camp due to exposure to COVID-19, Worthey and his brother both wanted the first shot at the monster and had a "shoot off" to determine who got that chance. Jed Worthey won, and even though he saw the big buck on his hunt, he could not get a shot.

The next day it was Gray Worthey's turn. He got on the stand well before daylight, and at about 7:30, the buck eased out through the woods about 50 yards from where he sat in his Millennium lock-on stand. The buck made a big circle and started feeding, but it never offered a shot.



Gray Worthey with his 14-point Hogue Island buck that measured 170 inches.

After it had been there a few minutes, something spooked the buck, which trotted off into the distance as Worthey watched helplessly.

ANOTHER CHANCE

Worthey texted his father and told him he had seen the buck and almost had a shot, but it walked off. He added, "I think I'm having a panic attack."

Who wouldn't?

He went back early in the afternoon and actually cut out a few more small shooting gaps in case the deer came back the same way again. Sure enough, right before dark, the big buck came back on the same path. This time, he took the shot before the deer could get behind that group of small trees.

"When I shot him, he was slightly quartered toward me, and I thought I'd made the perfect shot," he said. "But the arrow only went in halfway, and I wasn't sure. With his size, we decided to just go back

to camp and give him some time. After a while, we snuck back out and found a blood trail, but not a lot of blood. We found where he ran between two trees and broke the arrow off, so we decided to wait until morning and get some help."

It was a good decision. Another good decision was contacting local tracker Brad Whittington, who brought his dog, Boone, and they tracked down the 14-point. It was laying in a patch of grass in the middle of a thicket.

After he found the deer, Worthey was almost in shock. The best way he could describe it was "surreal!" He killed the buck with a Hoyt Spyder bow, shooting a Victory RIP arrow with a Rage broadhead. ■



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Symetre spinning combos

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



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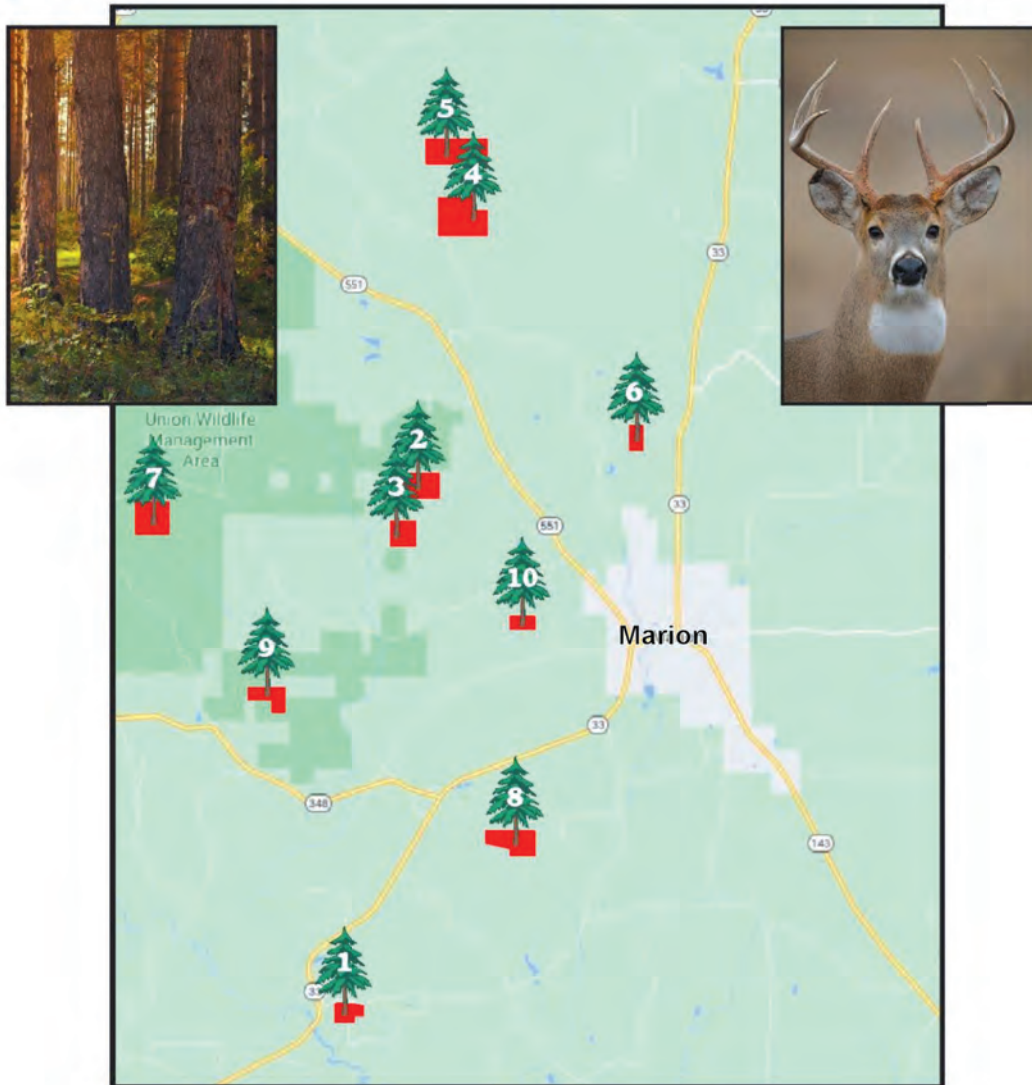
Zodias couples a hollow Carbon Monocoque Grip into a C14+ reel seat to achieve up to 130% more sensitivity than conventionally constructed rods, ultimately transmitting vibration from underwater structure, lure action or bites into the palm of an angler's hand. Shimano's Hi-Power X lies at the heart of Zodias and benefits anglers by increasing the transfer of energy through the rod for enhanced accuracy and casting distance as well as reduced blank twist for better control when fighting fish. The technique specific series includes 9 casting and 8 spinning rods.

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The Three Musketeers

MISSISSIPPI MOTHER AND DAUGHTERS HAVE BECOME EXPERT DEER HUNTERS WHO HAVE PLENTY OF ADVICE ALL HUNTERS SHOULD TAKE TO HEART.

■ By Mike Giles

Ashley Mills scanned the cutover, looking for any sign of a doe in heat or rutting buck that she knew could appear at any moment. A veteran hunter, Mills had located a hot scrape line and trail leading into the thick cutover, and she knew that any doe that came down the trail might have a buck in tow.

Suddenly, a buck approached from behind her, grunting and looking for that hot doe. As it came down the trail, Mills centered the crosshairs on it and squeezed the trigger.

Tic-Boom! The rifle roared, and the buck lurched and ran about 25 yards before collapsing in a heap. The 8-pointer sported a rocking chair rack and weighed 196 pounds, a monster for her area.

When it comes to hunting and harvesting bucks during the rut, Teresa May and her daughters, Ashley Mills and Amy May, are about as successful as any hunters — and more than most. Their success didn't come easy, nor did it happen quickly, but it's all because Jeff May introduced his daughters to deer hunting, and they fell in love with it. Teresa May got in on the action after the girls did, and she is a successful hunter in her own right.

A couple of years ago, all three women harvested trophy bucks from central Mississippi that anybody would have been proud of. That put a lot of pressure on the father, but he got in on the action and harvested a nice one as well.

It all started when he took Ashley hunting, and her love for it prompted little sister Amy and mother Teresa to get involved, too.

Jeff May not only took the girls hunting, but he taught them to shoot and how to hunt and pattern bucks. He made it so much fun that they all got involved and haven't looked back.

Ashley Mills had acute lymphoblastic leukemia when she was a teenager, and as a result participated in a Catch A Dream hunt in southwest Mississippi. On the weekend hunt, Ashley, then 14, killed her first bucks — an 8-pointer and a 5-pointer — and she's never slowed down. Thankfully, she overcame her illness and became an avid hunter and deadly shot.

HOT SPOTS ➤

HOT SPOTS

"I scout for active buck sign and like to hunt trails, scrape lines and creek crossings during the morning and around food plots in the afternoon," said Mills, who lives in Madden with her husband, Chris. "During the mornings, I'll get in a stand before daylight and stay until around 11. I've killed most of my bucks on cold, nasty days, so I'm going to hunt during the rut, no matter how bad the weather is."

While it is important to know the area you hunt and to place your stands in the proper places, it's imperative to learn how to shoot your rifle and be proficient with it. Chris and Ashley Mills like shooting, and they attended long-range shooting classes in Meridian a few years ago.

"We practiced shooting at long range, and out of a class of 12, I was the only woman and only person to shoot a tennis ball at 540 yards," Mills said. "I shot that one with a .308 Remington Model 700 rifle in a Magpul chassis with a Vortex Razor scope. That training has definitely helped me, but my favorite deer rifle is a Thompson Center .35 Whelan. After I shot a deer with that rifle, it's been my favorite."

"Last year, I killed a buck coming down a trail in late December and then shot another buck about three weeks later coming down the same trail," she said. "If you can locate a hot trail and place your stand far enough from it that you don't alert the bucks, you can see a lot of does and bucks during the rut, and you'll probably get a few shots, too."

TERESA MAY AND SPLIT BROW

Theresa May prefers hunting green fields during the afternoon and evening.

"I like to hunt food plots during the rut and late season, because the food is scarce, and you'll usually see a lot of deer activity. Two years ago, I was hunting over a green field near our house in Conehatta during the rut, and I saw a lot of deer activity all afternoon."

May got in her stand around 3 p.m., and does and small bucks started pouring into the field.

"The deer ran back and forth, and a small buck ran them into the woods and chased them back and forth," May said. "It was really entertaining, but suddenly everything changed, and I could sense something was about to happen. All of the deer in the field stared at one spot in the woods, and I could see a deer at the edge looking out."


"When that big buck stepped out, as Fred Sanford used to say, 'I'm about to have the big one.' I was so nervous and excited," she said. "I was looking at him through binoculars when he was in the edge of the woods and coming out, but (I) put them down and raised my gun as soon as he cleared the woods."

When the buck looked down and turned broadside May settled her crosshairs on him and squeezed the trigger.

"Boom!" The buck was dead on its feet.

"We'd never seen this buck in this area, but Amy had been hunting him for two years and had him on camera," Theresa May said. "Jeff had named him 'Split Brow' because of the split brow tine, and we think he left the area he had been in, looking for a hot doe."

The 9-point buck weighed 180 pounds and sported a wide, rocking-chair rack with tall tines.



Trails between a buck's bedding area and a primary food source can be productive for hunters.



TRANSITION AREAS

Amy May, who lives in Biloxi, has been hunting deer since she killed her first buck at age 10; she's become an accomplished deer hunter since those early days spent with her father.

"I like to hunt trails and prefer hunting them in transition areas," she said. "One of my favorite stands was overlooking a trail that came across from hardwood timber into a pine plantation. The hardwoods were on the adjoining private land, and the pine thicket was on our hunting lease. My stand was about 100 yards from where the trail crossed through a lane between the two sections."

May had been seeing a nice 6-point buck cross the trail regularly, and one morning she was watching the trail and thought the 6-point was coming through again.

"I turned on the camera I had set up to film the deer and raised my gun just to check him out and realized it was the



Teresa May harvested this bruiser while hunting near Conehatta. The massive buck sported 9 points with a split brow tine.



Ashley Mills tagged this big 10-point buck near Madden.

big deer I'd been hunting a couple of years," May said. "I shot him right behind the shoulder with my .35 Whelan, and he ran about 30 yards and collapsed. He was walking all stove-up and looked worn out from all of the fighting and doe chasing."

May had actually been hunting the area hard for a couple of months, just hoping to catch a glimpse of the big buck. Ironically, she almost skipped hunting that day due to the weather.

"I started not to go that morning, but I went on anyway because of the rut and due to the fact that I've killed most of my bucks during bad weather," she said. "I went into the stand before daylight and was watching a food plot out front and looking at the lane that bordered the edge of the hardwoods and pine plantation."

"This was a good crossing area, and I'd seen a lot of does crossing through and hoped that a big buck would follow one through as well," she said. "I knew the buck was also using the trail, too, as I'd seen him on my game camera, but he moved only at night or when it was raining."

While she'd hunted this stand at all times of day, she had passed up quite a few bucks, preferring to wait until the big one came through. Sometimes, she would come to the stand late morning and hunt through the mid-day hours.

"The one thing that kept me going to the woods and hunting, even when I was tired and worn out, was the fact that most of the bucks I've killed or seen in the woods were moving during the nastiest weather you could imagine," May said. "Bad weather has been my favorite time to hunt, no matter the time of day." ■

A line or rubbed trees is a great place to set up and watch during the rut, as both bucks and does will use these features to find breeding partners.

Tips from the fair sex

- Scout the land you hunt and learn where the deer normally bed and where available food sources are so you can catch them going to the food source or coming back to the bed.

- Hunt food plots or green fields during the rut from concealed stands. Remember, where the food is, the does will be, and the bucks will follow.

- Stay away from the deer's bedding and feeding grounds to prevent disturbing the deer's routine.

- Hunt trails crossing streams along the edges of thickets and transition areas where the landscape changes.

- Hunt near the most-available food source during the time you plan to hunt.

- Place your stands as far from trails as possible to prevent spooking deer.

- Hunt edge cover as well as lanes that separate different types of timber.

- Always look for fresh scrape lines and rub lines during the rut, as the bucks and does will leave their calling cards while looking for available suitors.

- Stay in the woods as much as possible, as deer move at all times of the day during the rut, no matter how tough the weather conditions are.

- Hunt power lines, pipe lines, cutovers or any areas that you can catch glimpses of bucks chasing does at long ranges during the rut.

- Learn to shoot the weapon of your choice and become proficient with it at all distances. ■



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



DABBING IN DUCKS

By David Hawkins

MISSISSIPPI PROVIDES COUNTLESS ACRES OF GREAT HABITAT FOR PUDDLE DUCKS; HUNTERS IN THE MAGNOLIA STATE SHOULD TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF THEIR OPPORTUNITIES.

THERE IS SOMETHING ROMANTIC ABOUT DUCK HUNTING:

the sights and smells of the dawn, the sound of whistling wings and banking birds as decoys bob and dip on the wind ripples of a pond.

Truth be told, waterfowl hunting may well be the oldest hunting sports in Mississippi. I say “sport” because market hunters, who supplied wagon loads of game to local markets for sale, had little or no interest in the aesthetics of the outing. Using punt guns loaded with pounds of shot and black powder, they did nothing for the conservation of our natural resources, but from that misuse sprung forth a conservation movement that grew to every corner of the nation.

The Mississippi Flyway is a great funnel that empties the vast prairie pothole nesting grounds of the United States and Canada and brings waterfowl south for the winter. Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas are among top producers of rice, soybeans and corn, making the harvested fields along the Mighty

Muddy ideal wintering habitat. Some ducks travel on to the coastal marshes for their winter vacation, but the vast majority are called short-stoppers, flying only as far south as they need to find open water and ample food.

Within Mississippi, waterfowl will predictably mass themselves near the bigger bodies of water, but enough will scatter eastward into other drainages to keep things interesting for hunters. Where there is water and food in winter, there will be ducks. The Tenn-Tom Waterway offers hunting opportunities, as do the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lakes: Enid, Sardis, Grenada and Arkabutla. Flooded timber, be it seasonal as found along the Mississippi River or beaver ponds scattered across the hill counties, will attract ducks.

DABBLING IN PUDDLE DUCKS >



Widgeon are beautiful puddle ducks that are regular visitors to many areas on all of North America's waterfowl flyways.

DABBLING IN PUDDLE DUCKS

For the most part, ducks can be divided into two groups: divers and dabblers, monikers that relate to the feeding style the ducks employ. Divers, as the name implies, submerge themselves and feed on plants and invertebrates at depths to 5 feet. Divers' feet are located toward the rear of the body, so propulsion is enhanced as the bird swims below the surface. Common diving ducks include the bufflehead, canvasback, hooded merganser, lesser scaup, redhead, ring-necked duck and ruddy duck. Hunters can identify diving ducks by the way they take flight. Divers "run" a short distance on the surface of the water before becoming airborne.

Dabblers have feet and legs more centered on the body and feed at or just beneath the surface. Also called puddle or pond ducks, dabblers favor shallower water. Mississippi's favorite dabblers include the mallard, gadwall, blue- and green-winged teal and wood ducks. The widgeon and pintail are also fairly common. Unlike divers, dabblers take flight by propelling themselves upward with their feet and legs and taking flight immediately.

Bag limits dictate the numbers of ducks that may be harvested. Some knowledge of ducks is required for hunters to remain on the right side of the law.

THE GOOD NEWS

Mississippi is blessed with a plethora of duck habitat. Several

big decoy spreads, including motion decoys, are part of most Mississippi duck hunters' tactics for dabbling ducks, aka puddle ducks.

Wildlife Management Areas offer draw hunts for ducks and manage the property expressly for waterfowl. Mahannah WMA is a prime example. It features ponds where seed-producing crops flourish during the summer, only to be flooded in the fall for approaching ducks. Hunting is by a permit-only basis, but chances are good of being drawn. Pay a visit to the area this winter and make a note on your calendar to submit your application in 2021.

The Mississippi River offers an open opportunity for waterfowl hunters with a boat and the grit necessary to make a hunt happen. As a younger man, I hunted the flooded timber south of Rosedale with good success. The gadwalls were plentiful, as were greenheads. Another area where the ducks decoy for us was the flooded timber where Lake Chotard connects to the river.

"Due to COVID-19, many breeding waterfowl survey efforts were unable to be conducted this year," said Houston Havens, waterfowl coordinator for the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks. "However, the department's waterfowl surveys showed



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



strong numbers.... waterfowl breeding habitat was in good shape for much of the prairie pothole region, and ... there should be plenty of ducks ready to head south toward Mississippi this hunting season.”

Experts say to brush in your duck boat with willow limbs, sheaves of shore grass and other natural material, as well as camouflage netting. Decoys need to be scattered and, of course, the more action they have, the more realistic they will appear to a passing flock looking for a resting place.

Ducks are attracted to decoys for two main reasons: the security found in numbers, and the promise of an easy meal.

TARGET THE SHALLOWS >

Mallards like this drake greenhead are a popular puddle duck that is shot in good numbers along the entire Mississippi Flyway.



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TARGET THE SHALLOWS

“Dabbling ducks prefer shallow water,” said Dr. Mike Brasher, a biologist with Ducks Unlimited, a national conservation group. “Flooded soybean fields are prime habitat for dabblers of all kinds. The same goes for flooded hardwoods, where smaller acorns such as water oaks are plentiful. Boats are not an issue here as they are in deeper water, but a quality pair of waders makes the hunting far more comfortable.”

Art Bradshaw, an avid hunter and former conservation officer, enjoys hunting wood ducks in the hill country of Scott and Smith counties; he was involved in efforts to trap and band wood ducks. Some of his favorite hunts were also some of the shortest.

“There are beaver ponds where woodies come to roost, and there was a surprising regularity to their habits,” Bradshaw said. “They had a favorite roost but fed in the Strong River and the feeder creeks to the river. Every evening, they would return to this one particular roost just minutes before legal shooting light was gone. It was easy to bag a limit, but then it was over.”

Bradshaw said one of the wood ducks he helped to band was harvested by a hunter in Georgia, proving woodies take part in a migration of sorts. For the most part, wood ducks spend most of their lives in a relatively small area. Wood duck boxes in small ponds all across Mississippi aid in the ducks’ population.

Simple to make and easy to place, they are one thing hunters and conservationists can do to insure future numbers.

Mike Kavanagh of Vicksburg hunts in the lower Delta, just a shotgun’s echo away from Eagle Lake. This year, his daughter, Madelyn, harvested her first ducks — three green-winged teal — while hunting with Jeff Terry at his Chilhowie Farms.

“I have hunted with Jeff for 30 years,” Kavanagh said. “He really likes helping young people, and first-time hunters get the quality experience they need to build interest in the sport.”

Don’t overlook the Pearl River and its many oxbows and tributary creeks and streams. The Pascagoula River is another popular stopping place for all sorts of ducks.

Other state-managed lands with good waterfowl hunting include: Twin Oaks, Muscadine Farms, Howard Miller, Sardis Waterfowl and Sky Lake. Even some state lakes such as Neshoba County Lake offer some duck hunting.

On the federal side of the ledger, the Noxubee and St. Catherine national wildlife refuges offer the waterfowler excellent opportunities. Matthews Brake, Morgan Brake and the Theodore Roosevelt complex offer duck hunting as well, but some boots on the ground time is required to find just the perfect water for your hunt. ■



Wood ducks like this colorful drake are common visitors to ponds and other small bodies of water around Mississippi.



DUCK SEASON DETAILS

Migratory bird seasons come under the purview of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Mississippi is given a framework that allows the Commission on Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks to divvy up the days so hunters have the maximum opportunity allowed.

For the 2020-21 season the dates are: Nov. 13-29, Dec. 4-6, Dec. 9-Jan. 31, 2021. Feb. 6-7 2021, is set aside for youth, veterans and active military.

The daily bag limit is six ducks, including no more than 4 mallards (no more than 2 hens), 1 mottled duck, 2 black ducks, 1 pintail, 3 wood ducks, 2 canvasbacks, 1 scaup and 2 redheads.

The merganser daily bag limit is 5, with only 2 being hooded mergansers. The daily bag limit on coots is 15.

The possession limit is three times the daily limit.

In addition to a valid hunting license, waterfowl hunters are

required to have in their possession a valid state and federal waterfowl stamp, often just called a "duck stamp." ■

Mississippi hunters have a duck season that's divided into three segments, including a short season in early December and a longer one that starts a few days later.



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Catfish guru David Magness may have named his guide service “Cat’N Aroun’” but when it comes to pulling both numbers and trophy sizes of catfish in his boat, he takes his business very seriously.

Magness is from Hernando, just a short ride from the Mississippi River where he does most of his fishing. He doesn’t have to worry about overcrowding on some of his favorite catfish holes — many of which are on the river near Tunica during colder weather, as he finds duck hunting, deer hunting and just staying out of the cold altogether pretty much gives him the run of the area.

Speaking of catfish holes, that’s exactly what Magness looks for around the holidays when he’s out on a guide trip with

one of his clients.

“Big blue catfish love deep holes in the Mississippi River pretty much year-round, but when the water temps drop, they definitely have a preference for those with slack water in them,” said Magness (901-356-1008), who admits that not every hole will hold catfish, so he expects to do a lot of looking before he wets a line.

“In the summer, I don’t have to mark fish on the sonar, because these big cats move so much,” he said. “If it’s a hole that has bait, I’ll fish it, because I know that, sooner or later, something will move in. In the winter, however, I need to see something, because with slower metabolism, you’re fishing for what’s there.”



COLD CATS ARE COOL, TOO

WINTER FISHING ON THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER REQUIRES A LITTLE DIFFERENT APPROACH, BUT THERE ARE CATFISH TO BE CAUGHT, AND NICE ONES, TOO.

■ By Phillip Gentry

THE SELECTION OF WHAT'S ON THE END OF THE HOOK IS ALSO IMPORTANT IN WINTER.

Slower metabolism means smaller offerings.

The bait-of-choice on the river, skipjack herring, is still the top choice, despite not being readily available this time of year and used frozen. Magness admits he has had great success with some alternative baits, however.

"At certain times, you can't beat shad, either gizzard shad or even threadfin shad," he said. "My wife and I won a catfish tournament one February — I mean, we walked off with it — and (we) caught all 18 fish that day on fresh shad. Everyone else was using skipjack and only had a fish or two to show for it."

With smaller baits, downsized to thumb-sized rather than hand-sized pieces, come smaller hook sizes. Magness uses a Team Catfish Double Action hook in 8/0 most of the time but drops to a 7/0 or even a 6/0 if hookups are scarce.

Even with the preparations for colder water, he said he

expects only one or two bites per hole, and the average size in his part of the Mississippi is in the 10- to 15-pound range.

"That's not a hard and fast rule," he said. "Larger fish are generally loners, and I caught a fish pushing 60 pounds on New Year's Day last year, so they're out there."

BOTTOMS UP

One of Magness's secrets this time of year is that he doesn't fish on the bottom, not all the time. In fact, he prefers not to anchor the boat if he can find the right hole with a minimal amount of current.

A lot of catfish guys are just now starting to realize that catfish will suspend off the bottom, even higher on some days. As a rule, he starts just off the bottom and works his way up

While most winter catfish will be in the more moderate 10- to 15-pound range, the possibility of landing a 60-pound trophy is always a possibility.



Courtesy David Magness

Bites may be timid at first, or the rod may bow over double when a winter catfish takes the bait.

as conditions and his sonar unit dictate.

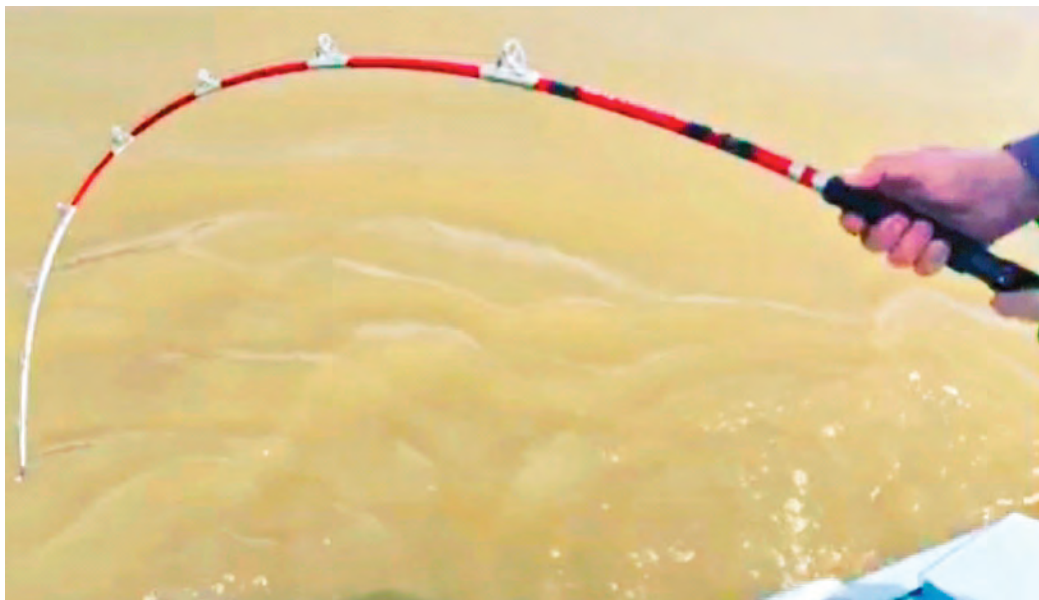
“I’ll get in a deep hole with little to no current and use the Spot-Lock feature on my trolling motor to keep the boat still,” he said. “I’m basically dropping the bait straight down, but I use enough weight to keep the line as vertical as possible in the water column.”

Magness has a special rig he uses for targeting suspended catfish. He ties an 18-inch leader of 50-pound High-Seas Quatro monofilament to the hook. Above that is a 90-pound barrel swivel that connects to the main line, 80-pound braid. He uses a Rig Rap sinker slide with a Hawaiian swivel that connects to his weight, which generally weighs between 20 and 30 ounces. Because there is some considerable friction on the line at the connection, he adds a rubber bead between the slide and the swivel to protect the knot from chafing.

“It sounds like a heavy weight, and I know I said I like slack-water holes, but this is the mighty Mississippi River we’re talking about,” he said. “I want that line to be straight up and down. The weight will keep it that way, especially with the way I fish it.”

His rod of choice is a B’n’M 7½-foot Silver Cat Elite. It’s a one-piece construction rod, and that plays into his presentation.

“That rod, placed in a rod holder, is going to bend over pretty dramatically and point toward the water,” he said. “Bites when fishing for suspended fish are often upward bites, meaning the fish takes the bait and moves up in the water rather than going down.”



Courtesy David Magness

ZODIAS
HI-POWER X

Synonymous with performance, the redesigned line of Zodias rods incorporate Carbon Monocoque technology passed down from Shimano’s elite series of rods that set the industry standard for sensitivity.

SHIMANO
fish.shimano.com

Magness said he can describe the bite as two distinct bites, either a “hammer” bite that pulls the rod tip down in the water or a lifting bite where you see the line go slack. A hammer bite will often take the rod four eyes deep, and the hook is already set. The other bite is different.

“When you see the line go slack — or move off dramatically to one side — you need to turn that handle on the reel fast and get that circle hook set,” he said. “My favorite weight size is 24 ounces, but they’ll still bring the line up, weight and all.”

The typical scenario for Magness is to motor across a deep, slow-moving hole and look for fish on his graph. If he likes what he sees, Magness deploys the trolling motor, hits the Spot Lock function to hold him in place, and drops the baited rig to the bottom, then turns the reel handle three cranks to get the bait off the bottom.

Rather than move if he doesn’t get a bite, he may bump the boat around to different locations over the hole and wait a little longer. He may not cover the entire hole in such fashion, but by moving his boat around the same location without reeling in and taking the bait out of the water gives the fish time to decide if they want the bait or not.

If he gets no takers after re-positioning the boat two or three times, it’s probably time to stow the trolling motor and head for the next hole. ■

Unlike summer, when baitfish in a desired location are enough to spend some time there, Magness wants to mark fish before he wets a line in the winter.



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.



Courtesy David Magness

The Spot Lock and Jog features on Minn Kota's iPilot enhanced trolling motors allow anglers for multiple species to methodically cover a fishing spots without leaving gaps.

JOGGING IN PLACE

Minn Kota has enhanced its line of iPilot trolling motors with new hardware and software algorithms that work to hold you tighter to your fishing location than ever before.

The enhancement is called Spot Lock. Through the use of GPS technology, Spot Lock is one of the most-accurate electronic GPS anchors ever.

In addition to the ability to lock your boat in one place using only the trolling motor, an additional function called Spot-Lock Jog allows you to move your boat, while on Spot-Lock, 5 feet forward, backward, left or right — just by pushing a button.

This is done entirely with the iPilot remote control; the angler does not have to touch the foot pedal to reposition the boat.

Minn Kota fans, ranging from bass to crappie to catfish anglers, tout the Jog feature as a systematic way to pick apart a piece of structure or fishing hole without leaving gaps that re-anchoring or picking up the trolling motor would allow.

"The Jog function is also one reason I prefer a Minn Kota TerraVox trolling motor," said guide David Magness. "I use the Rip-tide, which is the saltwater version, in a 36-volt, 110-pound thrust. The Jog feature on the remote control lets me move the boat from Spot Lock to any where I want in 5-foot increments. For 15 feet, I just hit the jog button three times."

Magness said the days of hauling in hundreds of feet of cold, muddy anchor line, trying to wrangle it all into one boat compartment without creating a patchwork of tangles, and fighting to unhook anchors stuck on the bottom are behind him with his new trolling motor. ■

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Ground blinds, box blinds, duck blinds — all hunters need to sit somewhere during deer, duck and turkey season, even Labor Day weekend dove hunts.

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

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

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

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

For more info, visit: www.millennium-stands.com.



BIG LAKE'S PINTAIL PASSION

Rolling a perfect pintail trill out over the marsh is a talent that a lot of duck hunters can't master. Now, thanks to the Pintail Passion that has been added to Big Lake Calls' lineup, you don't have to do much more than blow the call.

According to owner Hugh McLaurin, a roller ball within the call's body allows just about anybody using the call — just by blowing into it — to make the beautiful trills and peeps that make pintails sit up and take notice. In addition, the call has two ports that allow you to alter the

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

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

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

MSRP: \$40 (Jatobé wood), \$50 (Rosewood).

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



G.LOOMIS IMX-PRO ROD SERIES

If you're not a full-time, professional bass fishermen, choosing the right rod for specific fishing situations might not be as easy as others make it.

Enter G.Loomis, with its line of IMX-PRO rods, which are made and marketed with specific lures and situations in mind. Now, the line of 74 rods features rods made specifically for fishing bladed jigs, swimbaits, "micro" swimbaits, Ned rigs, lipless crankbaits and ledges. Just match the rod to the technique and situation, and you're ready to go.

The entire IMX-PRO series features G.Loomis' multi-taper design to reinforce potential stress points on the rod blank, Fuji "K" frame Alconite tangle free guides and a

larger palm swell in the full-cork grips.

Three rods in the line address swimbaits — including a spinning rod for smaller baits on lighter, ballhead jigs — two for bladed jigs, two for Ned rigs, two for ledge fishing and one for fishing lipless crankbaits.

MSRP: \$345-\$355.

For more info, visit www.gloomis.com





Deep SIX slab TRICKS

By Kinny Haddox

**TOP PRO TEAMS
SHARE COLD-WEATHER
TRIPS FOR CATCHING
CHRISTMAS CRAPPIE.**

December isn't the most-popular month to catch crappie. The good fish aren't always easy to find. Hunting, football and the holidays have everybody busy. Many anglers just have too much to do. But stalking crappie in December can be one of the best fishing gifts anglers can give themselves.

Crappie tend to gather up in deeper water along channels and old river beds. In smaller bodies of water, they try to find the deepest water. In other lakes, crappie aren't far from where they

are caught most of the rest of the year. It boils down to the fact that crappie will go wherever baitfish take them. They head to wherever they hear the dinner bell ring.

We talked to Santa, and he doesn't have time to crappie fish, either, but he told us to talk to some of his favorite crappie fishermen on his "nice" list and get their take on Christmas crappie. Here's their present to us — tips and seasons greetings for December crappie fishing.

CAPPS AND COLEMAN >

CAPPS AND COLEMAN

In the world of crappie fishing, Ronnie Capps and Steve Coleman, both from Tiptonville, Tenn., are like peanut butter and jelly. Everybody's heard of the most-dominant duo in the history of competitive crappie fishing.

You've heard the line, "We're gonna need a bigger boat?" Well, Capps and Coleman must often find themselves thinking "We're gonna need a bigger trophy room." They have won just about every tournament and angling title there is out there.

"Through the winter, it's a fun time to catch fish" Capps said. "People get cold hands and don't want to fight the weather, but it's great fishing. The fish get a little more lethargic, which is good, because they won't run from you as bad — and they'll still bite. The electronics today is so good you can go to an area, and if you don't see fish in just a few minutes, you probably need to crank up and go somewhere else.

"With the new (electronics), we are learning every day. My newest tip is that you need to watch fish closely and figure out how far they can see the bait," he said. "They'll make a little reaction when they see it. When they do, stop the bait. Don't get any closer. If they see it, make them come to you. When you do that, you'll get close to 110% hookups. If you drop it too close, you'll spook them or be in an awkward spot and maybe not get a good hookset."

Capps also said you need to figure out the optimum bait size, too. For the most part, he downsizes everything, but some-

times, when it's cold, they'll like a big bait. Above everything else, he said, learn your equipment and how to fish it. That takes time. And learn pinpoint boat control. Without it, you won't catch nearly as many.

Coleman said fishing deep requires getting your bait down where the crappie are and keeping it there. There's no better way to do that, he said, than fishing a double-minnow rig with a big weight.

"Most fishermen set their bait the right depth, but a lot of them don't have enough weight to keep the bait where the fish are," he said. "When you move your bait, it is going to come up a foot or two, especially spider-rigging. Don't take yourself out of the game by doing that.

"And as with almost anything, two is better than one, so we fish the double-minnow rig a lot anytime we are in deeper water. You can set one bait a foot or 18 inches apart from the other and cover a lot more water."

Nobody knows this technique better than Capps and Coleman. B'n'M even sells a pre-rigged, double-minnow rig named for the two. It comes in several choices, with different size weights for different depths.

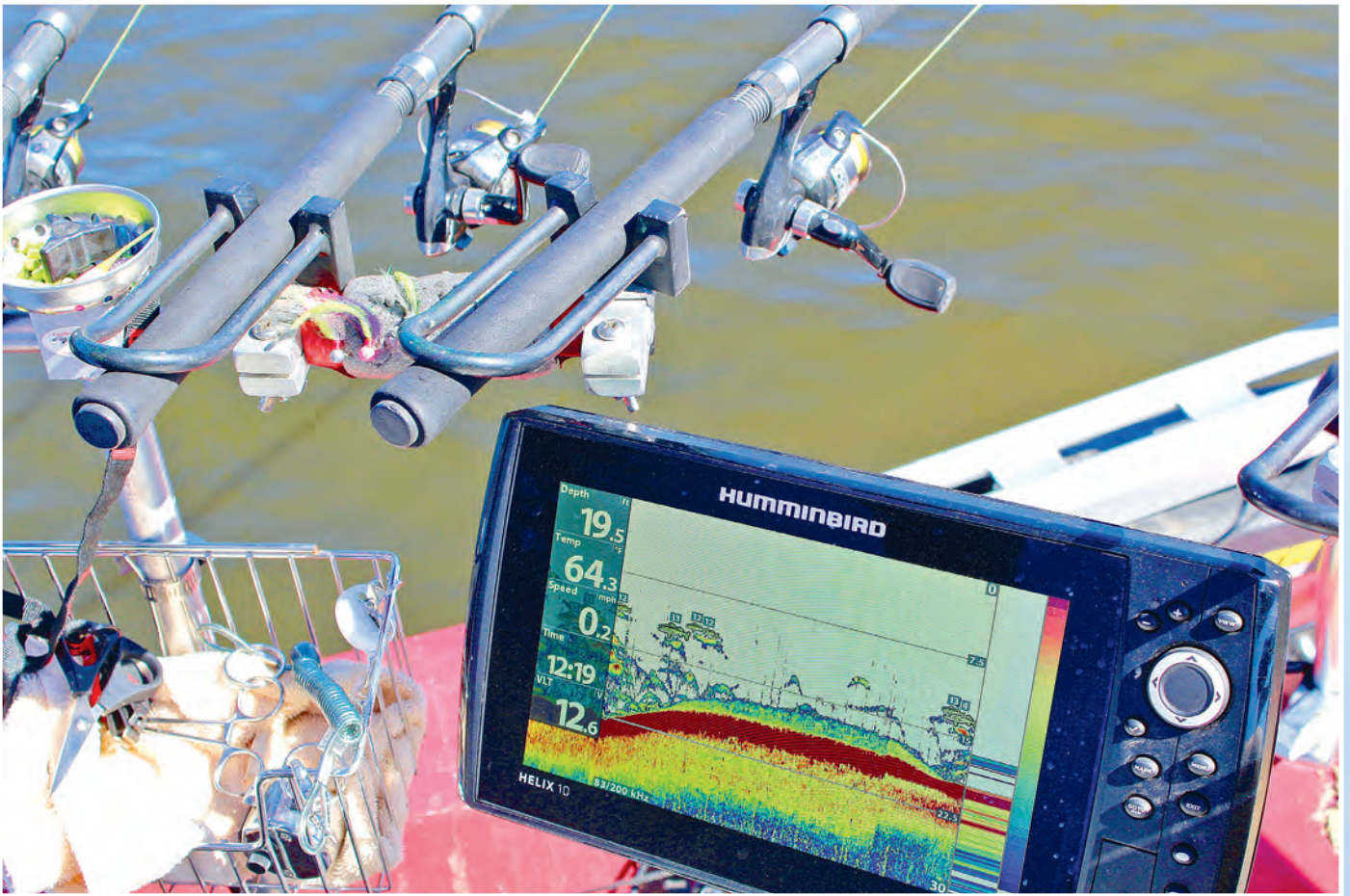
THE 'CRAPPIE MATES' >



Kinny Haddox has been writing magazine and newspaper articles about the outdoors in Louisiana for 45 years. He publishes a daily website, lakedarbonnelife.com and is a member of the Louisiana Chapter of the Outdoor Legends Hall of Fame. He and his wife, DiAnne, live in West Monroe.

When crappie gang up in deep water, so do fishermen. Anglers have to learn to concentrate on their fishing, not the other fishermen, to be successful.





Electronics play a major part in locating crappie when they are in deep water, especially when the fish are suspended.



Dan Dannenmueller fishes lots of baits, but one that many anglers could use more in deep water is a Road Runner with a minnow trailer for a bigger profile.

THE 'CRAPPIE MATES'

Dan and Sue Dannenmueller of Wetumpka, Ala., are one of several husband/wife teams fishing pro crappie circuits. They are among the top crappie anglers and active ambassadors for the sport. He is a past national champion and a regular presenter at Crappie University and other seminars. He and his wife teamed up to form Crappie Mates and fish together professionally.

Experience on all kinds of lakes has taught Dan Dannenmueller to be versatile. When the water is cold, he has five techniques he uses to catch crappie:

- Vertically jigging small spoons like a Thundermist Singnose in gold or silver;
- Fishing blade baits like Johnson Thinfishers;
- Vertically jigging small jigs like Bobby Garland Itty Bitty heads and jigs;
- Drop-shotting Blakemore's Live Shotn's;
- Casting a Road Runner Classic Marabou.

Of those, casting and winding the Road Runner is the easiest for inexperienced fishermen. Dannenmueller fishes all of these baits close to stumps, brush or contour breaks with a slow presentation and very little movement. He finds the right spot using his Garmin Livescope.

"When casting the Road Runner for deep fish, you just find the depth fish are at, then cast the bait, count it down a second per foot, and slowly retrieve it. The fish will nail it in 20 feet of water just like they will in two."



Sue Dannenmueller said she and her husband have the best luck in the warmest water in the lake, even in the winter. That's her tip.

"Lakes cool from the shallower, upper reaches first, to the deep southern areas last," she said. "The more-active fish will be in the higher water temperatures. Look for areas with lots of baitfish. You can do that (with) electronics or watch for water birds that feed on shad. They will also give these areas away. The fish will be roaming with the schools for shad."

One more good tip. If your lake has bridges, they are crappie havens in the winter.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Father/son crappie-fishing teams are also growing in numbers. One that is unique is the team of Trey and Tucker Underwood of Ruston, La. They catch fish like two seasoned veterans, but Tucker is only 8 years old. Recently, they finished in the top 10 in two national tournaments and in the top 25 in the Crappie Masters National Championship. If you think Tucker is just the "net man," think again.



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Tucker Underwood of Ruston, La., shows off a slab crappie the size that not many anglers his age, 8, catch very often.



“The highlight of my national championship was watching Tucker catch their biggest fish of the tournament about 30 yards from me,” another crappie pro said. “He did it all by himself while dad was at the other end of the boat.”

Tucker Underwood is already driving the boat, sitting up front and watching the electronics. The big fish he caught in the national championship tournament weighed 2.02 pounds — his first 2-pound slab. He landed four of the team’s 7-fish limit.

“That was the most exciting thing for me,” Tucker Underwood said. “It’s the first 2-pounder I ever caught, and it came in the national championship.”

He was single-poling on that fish, but his favorite technique is spider-rigging. In fact, that’s his best tip to other fishermen.

“I like to spider-rig, because you have more than one bait in the water at a time. I like to hold the pole in my hand when I can, because you feel the bite better and you miss fewer fish,” he said. “I also like fishing the double-minnow rig, too. I caught that big fish differently. I saw the fish out from the boat on the electronics, and I cast a small purple/chartreuse tail bladed jig out past the fish and reeled it right in front of the fish. The fish nailed it. They had been spooky, so I thought that was the best way to get him. He nailed it.”

Trey Underwood said that when the fish go deep and congregate, there is usually a crowd. He likes to go fish in those areas when he’s after numbers, but when he goes for big fish in colder months, he eases away from the crowd and tries to find fish in deeper sloughs off the main area everybody else is fishing.

“Two things I like to do is get away from where the bigger schools are, and I like to upsize my bait,” he said. “I use bigger jigs and get away from lighter, hair jigs and go big like

2½- and 3-inch tails. Sometimes, I’ll even tip it with a minnow. This time of year, the fish are wanting to eat. The bigger fish like bigger baits.”

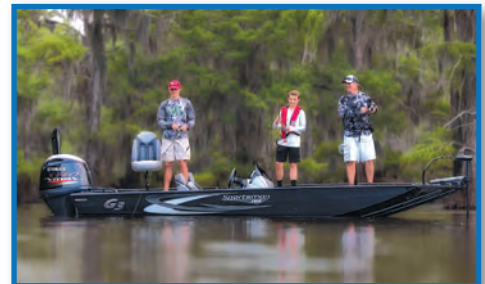
He also uses bigger weights in cold weather.

“I’ll even go to a ¼-ounce jighead sometimes, because I want to get the bait down there as quickly as I can, keep it down there where the fish are and then quickly move to the next spot and do the same thing over again,” he said. ■

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AS WINTER
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FISHING GETS
TOUGHER.**

WHEN BIG WON'T WORK

PHOTO COURTESY GREG HACKNEY

■ By Jonathan LePera

Greg Hackney, a pro bass fisherman from Gonzales, La., said largemouths have taught him some valuable lessons that have helped him excel on national bass fishing circuits.

Anglers who don't recognize that bass feed on smaller baits, experience significant fishing pressure and are heavily affected by unstable weather, they're going to struggle.

"Just because you downsize your lure doesn't mean you're downsizing the size of the fish, because you are generating bites," Hackney said.

The bass in waters that Hackney fishes feed on smaller baitfish and crustaceans, especially this time of the year.

"The first baitfish to move shallow are the shad born this year," Hackney said. "If you go to Venice, you'll catch one hundred 3-pounders a day when the conditions are right. Even to catch 5-pounders, you have to downsize your lure, not because of fishing pressure or weather, but because of the size of what they eat."

Early in the year, when the Blind River doesn't have matted vegetation, Hackney will target cypress trees on breaks, parking his boat in 15 feet of water but casting to bass living in 2 to 4 feet.

TIME TO GO SMALL ➤

TIME TO GO SMALL

This time of the year, Hackney turns to smaller lures to match what bass are eating. He loves to fish a buzzbait, and in December, it will be a 1/8-ounce Strike King Mini Pro. He crimps the rivet to make the blade squeaks as it's retrieved and discards the skirt in exchange for a Strike King Baby Menace grub to mimic a small baitfish fluttering on the surface.

Because he's throwing a smaller bait, he drops from a longer rod to a 6-foot-8 Lew's Hack Attack baitcaster paired with a Lew's BB1 reel spooled with 14-pound monofilament. If he needs to fish a spinnerbait, he also goes small, with a 1/4- to 3/8-ounce Strike King Money Maker rigged with a small trailer hook, fished on 14-pound Gamma Edge fluorocarbon on a 6-foot-10 rod.

"Some places in the marsh are where our biggest fish live, but it doesn't matter, because it is about what they eat," said Hackney, who refined his skills cranking dead-end canals in Blind Creek during the early spring with a red, 1/4-ounce Strike King Red Eye Shad or black back/chartreuse KVD 1.0 square-bill on his 7-foot, medium/moderate action crankbait rod. The rod's slower action allows bass to really eat the crankbait without fear of pulling it away from them.

Matted vegetation doesn't exist in all canals since the hyacinths are sprayed for navigation purposes. Hackney cranks the coon tail that grows in the middle for bass that pull off the bank and nestle in. He keeps his lipless crankbait just above the vegetation growing on the bottom.

"When you find the grass, I just pole down and make repetitive casts," said Hackney, who moves to 12-pound fluoro on his buzzbait outfit to get better action out of the bait. "That is the key to cold-water fishing. You move angles and want that bait to hit the grass. That's a reaction time of the year."

Hackney also targets suspended bass on bridge pilings with a drop-shot rig fitted with a 1/16-ounce weight and a Strike King Half Shell, a small, soft-plastic bait.

When choosing bait colors, common sense prevails. The color of the water will influence the color of the baitfish and crustaceans.



Photo courtesy jess schultz

The rate of retrieve is critical.

"A lot of time, it's the speed that gets the bite in those weather conditions. You are trying to get a reaction bite, and it seems like that little bait moving fast generates a bite," Hackney said.

The same basic rules apply; reel slower in colder water and more quickly in warmer water.

UNSTABLE WEATHER ➤



Greg Hackney squeezes down the rivet on a 1/8-ounce Strike King Mini Pro buzzbait to improve the blade's ability to make squeaking noises. **ABOVE:** Even when fishing small baits, a slow retrieve is the most-important factor when trying to get reaction strikes.

SALTWATER

STATE COASTAL WATERS REGULATIONS (0 - 3 miles)

FISH SPECIES	Minimum Lengths	Creel Limit (per person)
Greater amberjack	34" FL	1/day
Blue marlin	99" LJFL	no limit
White marlin	66" LJFL	no limit
Sailfish	63" LJFL	no limit
Sharks (large coastal/pelagic)@	37" TL*	1/day or 3/boat
Sharks@	37" TL*	1/day, 3/vessel
Cobia	36" FL	2 per day
Redfish (red drum)	18" minimum 30" maximum TL	3/day (1 over 30")
Flounder (state waters)	12" TL	15/day
Groupers (black and gag)	24" TL@	4/day aggregate
Hogfish	12" FL@	5/day
Red, yellowfin grouper	20" TL@	4/day
Scamp grouper	16" TL@	4/day
Speckled hind/Warsaw grouper	no minimum@	1/day each
Gray/schoolmaster/cubera/ mahogany/yellowtail/dog snapper	12" TL@	5/day aggregate
Mutton snapper	18" TL@	10/day
Queen/blackfin/silk/winchman snapper	none@	5/day aggregate
Vermillion/lane snapper	10"/8" TL@	20/day aggregate
Gray triggerfish	15" FL@	1/day
Golden/blueline/anchor/blackline tilefish	none@	20/day
King mackerel	24" FL@	2/day
Spanish mackerel	12" FL@	15/day
Yellowfin tuna	27" CFL@	3/day
Bigeye tuna	27" CFL@	no limit
Tripletail	18" TL	3/day
Spotted sea trout (speckled)	15"	15/day

@ For openings and closings of federally regulated fish and updated size limits, visit gulfcouncil.org.

FRESHWATER

FISH Species (Inland waters)	Minimum Size Limit	Creel Limit (per day)
Crappie/Panfish #	%	30 crappie, 100 bream
Largemouth, smallmouth, spotted bass	%	10 in combination
Channel catfish	No more than 1 over 34"	None +
Blue catfish	No more than 1 over 34"	None +
Flathead catfish	No more than 1 over 34"	None +
Striped bass or hybrid bass	15"	6 in combination
Mountain Trout (Lake Lamar Bruce)	No restrictions	3
Sauger	%	10
Walleye	%	3
Alligator gar/paddlefish	No fish over 30" in creel	2

TL=Total Length; LJFL=Lower jaw to middle of fork in tail; FL=Fork Length (tip of snout to middle of fork in tail); CFL=Curved Fork Length (measure of a line tracing contour of body from tip of upper jaw to fork of the tail).

+ In Lake Okhissa, 5 per day, in ReCon Lake and all MDWFP lakes, 10 per day

% For lake-specific regs, see MDWFP's Regulations Digest or www.mdwfp.com/

In Lake Okhissa and Percy Quin State Park, the creel limit is 50 per day.

* Possession of certain species of sharks is prohibited.

HUNTING SEASONS

SPECIES	SEASON DATES	BAG LIMIT	POSSESSION LIMIT
Doves	Sept. 5-Oct. 18 (n), Sept. 5-20 (s)	15	45
	Oct. 24-Nov. 21 (n), Oct. 10-Nov. 8 (s)		
	Dec. 23-Jan. 8 (n), Dec. 19-Jan. 31 (s)		
Quail	Nov. 26-March 6	8	
Rabbit	Oct. 17-Feb. 28	8	
Squirrel (fall)	Oct. 1-Feb. 28	8	
Squirrel (spr)	May 15-June 1	4	
Raccoon	July 1-Sept. 30	1 raccoon per party	
Rac/Opp/Bobct	Oct. 1-Oct. 31 (food/sport)	5/day, 8/party	
	Nov. 1-Feb. 28 (food/sport/pelt)	No limit	
Rails			
King & Clapper	Sept. 1-Oct. 4, Nov. 26-Dec. 31	15	45
Sora & Virginia	Sept. 1-Oct. 4, Nov. 26-Dec. 31	25	75
Gallinules	Sept. 1-Oct. 4, Nov. 26-Dec. 31	15	45
Snipe	Nov. 14 - Feb. 28	8	24
Crow	Nov. 7 - Feb. 28	No limit	No limit
Woodcock	Dec. 18 - Jan. 31	3	9
Wild Turkey			
Fall season	Oct. 15-Nov. 15 (permit, selected counties)	2 per season (may be either sex)	
Spring season	March 15-May 1	1/day, 3/season, longbeards only	
Youth season	March 8-14	1/day, 3/season, bearded birds only	

WATERFOWL SEASONS

SPECIES	DATES	BAG LIMIT
Duck	Teal only: Sept. 12-27	6
	Nov. 27-29, Dec. 4-6	6
	Dec. 9-Jan. 31	
Geese (Canada, blue, Ross, white-fronted, brant)	Sept. 1-30	5
	Nov. 13-29, Dec. 4-6,	Canada 3, Brant 1
	Dec. 9-Jan. 31	Snow/blue/Ross 20 White-fronted 3
Light Geese conservation	Oct. 1-Nov. 12, Feb. 1-5, Feb. 8-March 31	No limit

DEER SEASON

ZONE	ARCHERY	PRIM WEAPON	GUNS
Northeast	Oct. 1-Nov. 20	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 21-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Nov. 9-20 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Jan. 21-31 (archery/primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan. 20(dogs) Nov. 7-20 (youth)
East Central	Oct. 1-Nov. 20	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 21-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Nov. 9-20 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Jan. 21-31 (archery-primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan. 20(dogs) Nov. 7-20 (youth)
Southwest	Oct. 1-Nov. 20	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 21-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Nov. 9-20 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Jan. 21-31 (archery-primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan.20(dogs) Nov. 7-Jan. 20 (youth)
Southeast	Oct. 15-Nov. 20	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 21-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Jan. 21-31 (either-sex arch-primitive)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Feb. 1-15 (archery-primitive bucks only)		Dec. 24-Jan. 20(dogs) Nov. 21-Feb. 15 (yth)
Delta/South Delta	Oct. 1-Nov. 20	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 21-Jan. 1 (dogs)
	Nov. 9-20 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Jan. 21-31 (archery primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan. 22(dogs) Nov. 7-Jan. 20 (youth)

UNSTABLE WEATHER

Weather greatly influences fish activity, as does barometric pressure. Those days, when nature is active and birds are chirping, anglers grin, knowing a great day is ahead. When faced with minimal wind and blue-bird skies, Hackney knows to downsize.

Cold fronts can throw a monkey wrench into the best-laid plans. The first day after is always best; bass can be caught the same way as the previous day. The second day provides the toughest conditions because the sun is out, the wind has subsided and the skies have cleared, Hackney said.

There are exceptions to every rule; on a body of water that doesn't see much fishing pressure totally throw this out, he said.

FISHING AND MENTAL PRESSURE

Tough fishing conditions are no time for ego or stubbornness; getting spun out won't help your cause, either.

"You have to fish what's in front of you. If you go to a body of water where 10 pounds is a big bag, you fish for 10 pounds. You can't make something out of what doesn't exist," said Hackney, who won the FLW's Forrest Wood Cup in 2009 by junk-fishing with downsized lures.

Growing up fishing in Arkansas, Hackney doesn't remember ever needing to downsize, due to big fish, big forage

and manageable fishing pressure. By contrast, his home waters in Louisiana are chock full of anglers.

"They have a Wednesday night tournament at the St. James Boat Club, and a big bag is 8-6. You have to fish that size of fish."

Not only are bass fisherman getting better, the fish are getting wiser.

"The average angler is so much better," Hackney said. "It seems that bass never get accustomed to small plastics because they're so natural and are the closest baits we throw to matching Mother Nature like they do certain crankbaits and rattles, knowing not to bite them."

FISHING A BIG STICK

Hackney fishes several situations where he can still go big, just not as big as normal. He will pitch and flip dead hyacinths with familiar sticks, his 7-foot-6 and 7-foot-11 signature series rods, but his bait is still small, a 3-inch Strike King Baby Rodent that fits perfectly on a 4/0 hook. It's the only bait he needs. A 4-inch bait simply won't get bit.

Soak the bait, and don't move it quickly.

"I'll flip it in, let it go to the bottom, then pull it back up and



Photo courtesy strike king/lwls



A Strike King Bitsy Flip is a small jig that can still stand up to some awfully big winter bass. **OPPOSITE:** Vegetation is a great place to find cold-weather bass; just know where in the vegetation to locate your lure.

hold it,” Hackney said, noting that bass are most-often suspended, just under the mat. “Very few times do I catch them on bottom under a mat.”

The day after a cold front, when winds might move the mat around, he’ll suspend his bait. When fishing standing grass, those bass will be on bottom.

Let the bass tell him what fall rate they want.

“When you’re flipping mats, and you think you saw you line jump or twitch, or you feel a bump and you don’t get the fish, downsize your weight,” Hackney said. The fish might be turned off by the quicker fall when paired with a smaller plastic.

When the water is colored, bait colors like black/blue, Okeechobee craw and candy craw excel, while California craw is best in flat, clear water. Black neon is Hackney’s favorite during the winter, as crawfish are usually black and red.

CRACK ‘EM ON A JIG

Even when he fishes a jig, he goes smaller. He uses a compact Strike King Bitsy Flip jig which has a sturdy Mustad hook that won’t flex on a hookset. Add a Baby Rage Craw to keep his offering compact. Especially useful in colder weather, he can also fish behind other anglers and pick off fish they missed.

The Blind River is the closest body of water to Hackney’s home, and he can’t remember the last time he caught a bass on a full-sized jig. After all, their average size is only a pound.

“Occasionally in the spring, you’ll catch a 6-pounder, but they are few and far between,” Hackney said. “Most of those fish are marsh bass and not very big.” ■



Jonathan LePera is an avid angler and outdoor writer from Ontario, Canada. He lives near lakes Erie and Ontario, home to world class bass, walleye, and trout fishing, which are separated by the Niagara Falls.

2021 MODELS ARRIVING



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GETTIN' FRESH

Hal Schramm

Mississippi State University fisheries researchers sample fish around placed Christmas trees to measure the effects on the fish community of adding structure in Enid Lake.



MAKING A HOUSE A HOME

EFFECTS OF STRUCTURE IN MISSISSIPPI'S FLOOD-CONTROL RESERVOIRS

Photo courtesy Hunter Hatcher

Structure — above-bottom features such as aquatic plants and brush — benefit fisheries by providing added substrate for invertebrates that are important foods for fish and by providing refuge from predation to aid survival of young fish. Structure also benefits anglers by concentrating predatory sportfish that are attracted to forage fish.

As reservoirs age, structure declines in those where aquatic vegetation fails to become established. Many fisheries agencies have initiated programs to add structure to their aging reservoirs.

Mississippi's flood-control reservoirs — Sardis, Enid, Grenada and Arktabutla — are an extreme situation of structure deficiency. A recent study by the U.S. Geological Survey, Mississippi Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit and Mississippi State University fisheries researchers assessed the effects of the limited existing structure and

added structure on the fish assemblage in Enid Lake.

THE TEST

Like Mississippi's other flood-control reservoirs, Enid has extensive mud flats — areas that are de-watered during the annual winter drawdown to provide floodwater storage capacity — with very limited structure. In the first year of this two-year study, researchers compared the fish assemblages between mud-flat areas with no structure and areas with some, although scarce, natural structure, such as willow and cypress trees and flooded grass.

More species of fish were collected, and the fish were more abundant in sites with structure than in the open sites. Largemouth bass, bluegill, orangespotted sunfish, blacktail shiner and spotted gar were more abundant in sites with existing structure; brook silverside, common carp and gizzard shad were more abun-

dant in open sites.

In the second year, Mississippi State's research team compared the fish assemblages in areas with added structure — cypress and cedar brush piles — to areas lacking structure. Again, fish were more abundant in the areas of added structure. Further, fish abundance was positively related to the volume of the brush piles: bigger brush piles held more fish. And larger structures had wider size ranges of fish than smaller structure.

Black crappie, white crappie, bluegill, orangespotted sunfish, largemouth bass, blacktail shiner and emerald shiner had an affinity for larger structure volumes.



Hal Schramm is an avid angler and veteran fisheries biologist.

STRUCTURE DEFICIT DISORDER

Structure, whether natural or added, increased the abundance of fish. No real surprises here: as found in numerous evaluations in other reservoirs, structure attracts fish. The fish attracted to — and that presumably benefit from — structure include the primary sportfish in Enid Lake. Unlike studies in other reservoirs where the added structure is available year-round, fish in Enid can only use the structure when the mud flats are seasonally inundated.

The question asked of all efforts to provide structure for fish is whether the structure merely attracts and concentrates fish or whether the added structure actually increases the production and abundance of fish. Certainly, adding structure can do no harm, but long-term effects on fish abundance and production will require additional study.

Recent work in Texas has demonstrated that adding large amounts of structure does increase fish production. I think it is time to look beyond the question of “attraction or increased production?” and try to determine how much structure needs to be added to realize increases in fish abundance, growth, and production.

A second problem warranting attention for Mississippi’s flood-control reservoirs is providing structure to benefit fish year-round. The Mississippi State study documents the beneficial effects of structure in the barren water-fluctuation zone.

But the mud flats are de-watered in the fall, and the fish spend late fall through spring in a structure-deficient lake. Realizing the benefits of structure addition to the mud flats may also require addition of structure to the permanently inundated basin of the lakes.

Adding structure to habitat-deficient reservoirs is laborious and expensive. In Table Rock Lake, the Missouri Department of Conservation spent \$4 million adding structure to improve habitat. The effort was considered highly successful by biologists and anglers. Other reservoirs have benefited from habitat enhancement by cooperative efforts of anglers and state or federal management agencies. These voluntary efforts of anglers can make these projects more affordable.

Mississippi’s flood-control reservoirs have long benefited from structure additions during late-winter Habitat Days. Organized and supported by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and with technical assistance provided by Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks biologists to determine best locations for structures, volunteers install cedar tops, Christmas trees and stake beds. These efforts have benefited from participation of as many as 250 volunteer workers. More effort leads to better fishing. ■

Volunteers install cedar trees on a structure-deficient mud flat in Enid Lake during an annual Habitat Day.



Photo courtesy Keith Meals, MDWFP

LUNKER LINES

Paul Elias

"These tactics I've mentioned also will produce smallmouths and largemouths at Pickwick in December," Paul Elias said.



PICKWICK LAKE: 50 FISH A DAY IN DECEMBER POSSIBLE

ALABAMA RIG WILL CATCH ANYTHING, AND THERE ARE PLENTY OF FISH TO CATCH

I like to catch fish, lots of fish. I earn my living by catching bass, but anything that tugs on my line is fun to catch. The more tugs I get in a day, the more I enjoy myself.

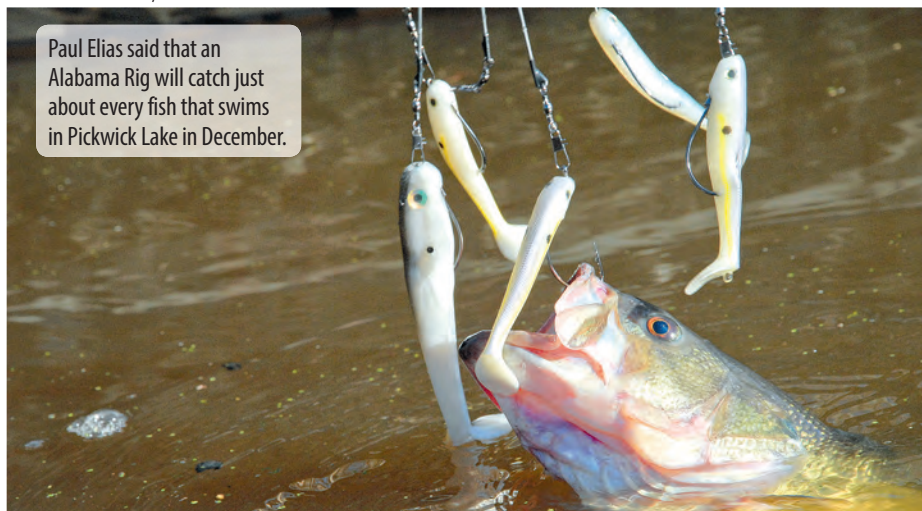
That's why Pickwick is my choice for Mississippi lakes in December. I can catch largemouths, smallmouths, spots, white bass, stripers, catfish and crappie using some of the same rigs.

ALABAMA RIGS

During most of a December day at Pickwick, I'll be fishing an Alabama rig. This umbrella-type, multi-bait rig will catch suspended fish, ledge fish and fish holding near the bottom. I can cover lots of water and catch numbers of fish.

I'll tie two Alabama rigs on two rods. The first will have ¼-ounce jigheads with 4-inch, pearl-colored, soft-plastic swim-baits that imitate shad. I'll tie this rig onto 50-pound bass braid and fish it with a 7.3:1 Bruin reel and a 7-foot-10, heavy plus-action FX Custom Rod.

Paul Elias said that an Alabama Rig will catch just about every fish that swims in Pickwick Lake in December.



The other rod will have tied on an Alabama Rig with ⅜-ounce jigheads featuring wide-gap hooks that can be rigged Texas-style. I'll bring the hook out top of the swimbait so it lays on the back of the bait. I'll skin-hook the point to make it weedless.



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.

I'll crawl the Alabama Rig on the bottom or through any type of cover. Remember, I'm basically a tournament bass angler, so I can cast and retrieve a vertical jig or use any type of fishing tactic except trolling. However, if you're fun-fishing, and your arm gets tired from throwing the Alabama rig, slow-troll that rig, cover plenty of water and catch a lot of fish. The Alabama rig is probably the best trolling bait available.

SCOPE THINGS OUT

I'll start fishing at the dam and then fish around the lock, down the walls leading into the lock and the barge tie-ups. Another advantage I have that I didn't have in the past is my Garmin LiveScope, which allows me to see how the fish are positioned, and at what depth they're holding. If my boat's in 30-foot deep water, and the fish are 20 feet deep, I can count the Alabama rig down and start reeling it to keep it in or just above the strike zone. If I'm attempting to catch bass in 15 to 20 feet of water, I'll count the Alabama rig down to 10 as it falls, then I'll start reeling it.

Other advantages my LiveScope gives me are that I can see my lure as it falls, and I can watch the fish take or follow the bait. That means I can keep my rig at the depth where the fish are holding. If the school of fish you're targeting is made up of stripers, white bass or spotted bass, generally, those fish will attack the Alabama rig as soon as they see it.

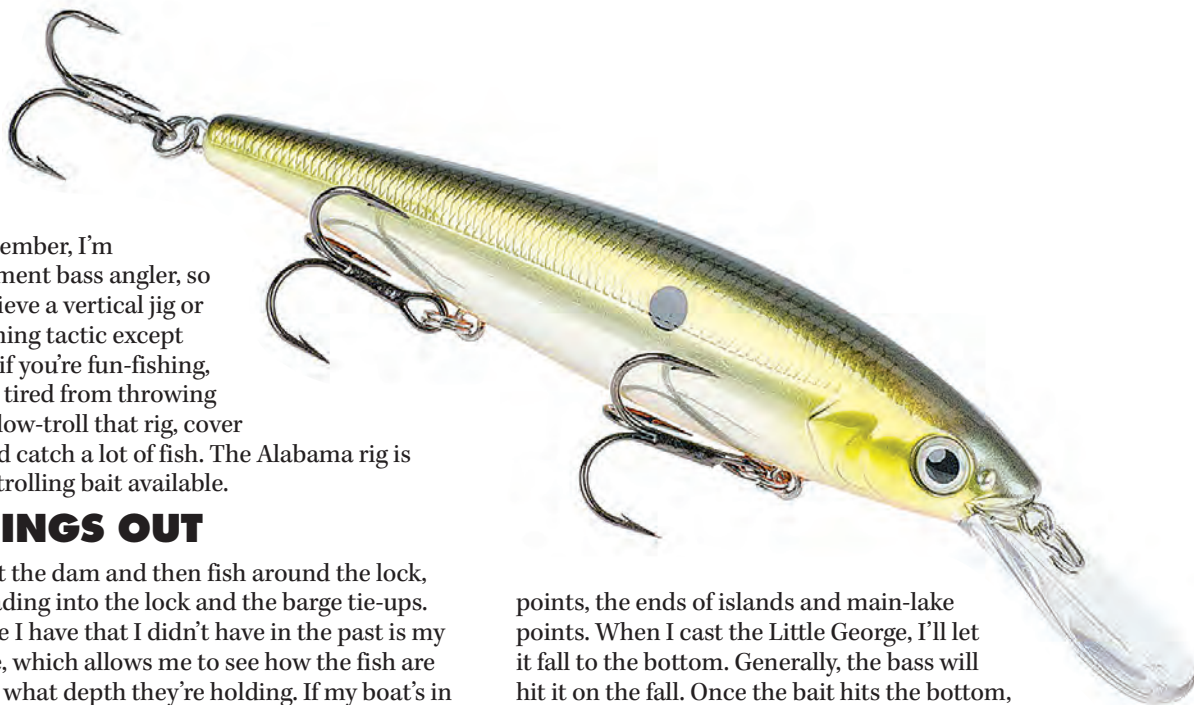
JERKBAITS

My favorite jerkbait to fish in December will have a purple back with a little bit of chartreuse on its sides and an orange belly. I guess the reason I like this color so much is because it seems to appeal particularly to spotted bass and smallmouths. However, largemouths will bite it, too. I'll fish this jerkbait on 10-pound White Peacock fluorocarbon with an 8:1 Bruin reel on a 7-foot, medium-action FX Custom Rod and concentrate on fishing on bluff banks, places where bluff banks fall into pockets and/or the mouths of creeks.

I'll start fishing the jerkbait 75 yards above the point of a bluff bank, fish around the point a short ways and then fish the end of the point where that underwater bluff bank drops off into 25 or 30 feet of water. I'll have two styles of jerkbaits tied on my rods — a regular jerkbait and a deep-diving jerkbait — and fish both of them. I'll let the fish tell me which kind of jerkbait they prefer.

LITTLE GEORGE

A Mann's Little George is a lead tailspinner that I'll fish on the same outfit I use for the jerkbait, except I'll use 14-pound fluorocarbon. I'll fish the Little George on bluff



points, the ends of islands and main-lake points. When I cast the Little George, I'll let it fall to the bottom. Generally, the bass will hit it on the fall. Once the bait hits the bottom, I'll pull it slightly up off the bottom and slow-reel it close to the bottom. I won't jerk it up high and let it fall back.

To enjoy a fun month of December fishing, try these tactics at Pickwick. You'll have a bent rod and a screaming drag all day. ■



LURE REVIEW

Don Shoopman



DELTA LURES' RATTLING JIG

Photo courtesy deltalures.com

When Fred King and Ray LaBorde, both of LaPlace, La., took matters into their own hands to make three different artificial baits, one of them was a little more of a challenge than the other two.

That lure evolved into the Delta Lures' Rattling Jig, one they're proud of today.

"At first, we had the eye with a little lip on it. It would hit (something) and roll over," said King, who helped found the company in 2011. "I encased the eye, which was a more smooth transition from the eye to the hook where it wouldn't roll over and get snagged."

The transition was enhanced by the mold used by Cliff Pace of Petal, Miss., the 2013 Bassmaster Classic champion, whose offerings include a line of jigs in V&M's Pacemaker series. The tweaking of the jig went back and forth before it got the go-ahead from King and LaBorde, bass tournament partners intent on filling a niche in the market with high-quality artificial lures at affordable prices.

King believes they have a winner with the Rattling Jig, as well as the other two products the company introduced: a spinnerbait and buzzbait.

"That was our bait we liked to use the most. It's been real nice to see (the company) grow," King said.

Each Rattling Jig features a 55-strand silicone skirt and double rattle chamber. It also has a streamlined head, horizontal recessed line tie and oversized fiber weed guard, plus a trailer keeper to keep a piece of soft plastic in place.

HOOK 'EM UP

The Rattling Jig is armed with a 4/0 Mustad Ultra Point Hook on the ¼-ounce model and a 5/0 Mustad Ultra Point Hook on the ⅜-, 1.2- and ¾-ounce models. King wanted a larger hook on the ¾-ounce model, which he uses most of the time, and he got it.

Those five sizes are available in 22 colors. King said the most popular locally are black/blue/orange, black/blue/purple (bruise) and black/red.

However, he said, "My favorite colors are black/brown/orange in the spring time."

The jig's success seems to be seasonal, with the beginning of the year the peak season. If it warms up quickly, spring arrives early, the jig's popularity sometimes wanes among bass and bass anglers.

"I like to fish it. One of the reasons is if I'm fishing Venice, and fishing the roseau canes, you can go back and forth and don't have to change (soft plastics like worms, creature baits, etc.) out. In the wintertime, that's all I throw," he said.

King prefers to throw the jig on braided line. Most of the time, he said, bass anglers fishing the jig in grass use braid. But in and around the Atchafalaya Basin, anglers like to throw it on fluorocarbon



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.

David Cavell holds up a 6-pound bass he caught on a Delta Lures Rattling Jig and Cliff's Craw skirt while pre-fishing the first week of November for the B.A.S.S. Nation Championship on Pickwick Lake.



Photo courtesy deltalures.com

line because of the oft-increased clarity.

The Rattling Jig is one of bass pro Logan Latuso's top three artificial lures in December. He favors a 3/8- or 1/2-ounce black/blue Rattling Jig.

Bass pro Brent Bonadona of Port Allen, La., uses a Rattling Swim Jig and Rattling Jig.

"I find Delta jigs have got a big-enough hook, (and the weed guard) deflects the bait in cover. Really, the only modification I do to that weed guard sometimes is spread it out," Bonadona said. ■

For more information on the Delta Lures Rattling Jig and other Delta Lures products, go to deltalures.com or call 504-559-1689.



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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Book: "How to Know When to Go" by Rick Taylor. \$14.95 (plus \$4 s&h). 100 pages, 43 illustrations. A comprehensive look at the main factors influencing fish and game activity periods, plus how to devise an effective when-to-go game plan using any year's PrimeTimes calendars. Individual assessments of bass, panfish, deer, turkey, and more.

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

25 50 75
AVERAGE

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

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

Brian Cope

Southern flounder are a prized inshore fish wherever they are caught.



SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: SOUTHERN FLOUNDER

The southern flounder, *Paralichthys lethostigma*, is a flat, oval-shaped fish native to the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. It is the biggest of the flounder species found throughout the Atlantic and Gulf.

Commonly referred to as simply “flounder,” the southern flounder is distinguished from other flounder by the numerous dark and light spots and blotches present on the dark side. While other flounder have ringed or ocellated spots or blotches, the southern flounder’s markings do not have these characteristics.

Fisheries biologists refer to southern flounder as being “left-handed,” because when held vertically with the eyes facing forward, it’s the left side of the flounder that is dark. The right side is white. On very rare occasions, a “right-handed”

flounder is caught. Also, on very rare occasions, the white side can be either as dark as the other or be partially brown.

Southern flounder spend most of their lives in estuaries, rivers and shallow, coastal waters, including in and around the surf zone. They are most abundant in and around the mouth of tidal creeks in water with shallow, muddy bottoms. They also spend time in flooded salt marshes at high tide. Most adult southern flounder head offshore for a few months during winter.

ANNUAL MIGRATION

Juvenile southern flounder stay in those same areas, but they stay inshore during winter until they are old enough to spawn — typically in the fish’s second or third year.

While these are saltwater fish, they

sometimes venture above the saltwater dividing line and into freshwater in some rivers. They seem to tolerate freshwater fairly well and find their way back to brackish or saltwater with no trouble.

The average southern flounder is 12 to 14 inches long and weighs 1 to 2 pounds, but they can get considerably larger. Most males live about 5 years in the wild, while females often live to be between 7 and 8 years old. Females are usually larger than males simply because they outlive them.

Both male and female southern floun-



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

Alan Thomas caught this nice southern flounder in Big Lake.



der begin spawning during their second or third years. By then, males are usually between 11 and 13 inches in length. Females are typically 14 to 16 inches long. During late fall/early winter, adults head offshore to spawn. They return in the spring, usually to the same inshore waters, year after year.

Flounder larvae spend their first 60 days traveling ocean of Gulf currents, which push them into inshore estuaries in late winter or early spring. As the larvae settle inshore, they change into their flat body forms.

Southern flounder are predatory fish, ambushing their prey using camouflage to blend into the muddy bottoms. Adults eat a wide variety of fishes and also shrimp and crabs. Their mouths are deceptively large, and they can eat much bigger meals than most people realize. Anglers targeting large flounder often use baits or lures that are quite large.

Anglers throughout the southeast have a few nicknames for flounder, including fluke, flatfish, flatty, and plie (pronounced pleh).

The world-record southern flounder was caught in 1983 in Florida's Nassau Sound, by Larenza Mungin. The fish weighed 20 pounds, 9 ounces.

The Louisiana state record, caught by Gary Hargis, weighed 13.06 pounds. Hargis caught the fish East of South Pass in June 1998.

Mississippi's state record weighed 10 pounds, 4.66 ounces, and was caught by Karen Good during March, 2007. ■

A large, modern Crest Classic Platinum Pontoon boat is shown on the water. The boat is white with black accents and features a Suzuki outboard motor. The text "Come see the Crest Classic Platinum Pontoons at our new location." is overlaid in a large, white, sans-serif font. Below the boat, the Crest logo and the word "CREST" are displayed in white on a dark background.

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