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DETECTIVE WORK FOR BIG DEER



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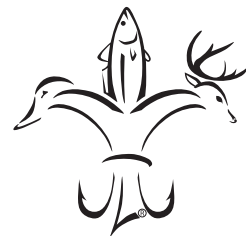
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Todd Irwin's 8-point, 150-inch monster, nicknamed "Blinky" was killed the afternoon of Oct. 29 near Camden.



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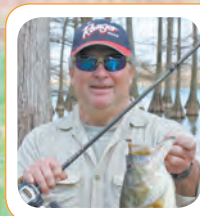
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OUTDOOR UPDATE

with
Mike Giles



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

BUCKS, DUCKS AND FISH GALORE! DECEMBER BRINGS OUT THE BEST IN MISSISSIPPI

December couldn't have gotten here at a more appropriate time after a year of uncertainty. One thing is now certain: bow season has started off with a blast. Trophy bucks are hitting the ground at a rapid pace and men, women and children

are harvesting some of the best early fall bucks you will ever see. If October and November are any indication of what is to come, then lock and load, buckle your seat belt and hold on for some of the best hunting this country has to offer, right here in the Southern Promised Land of Mississippi.

Becky Nicosia harvested a monster buck in Adams County with her bow, and several other hunters followed suit with trophies taken in Madison County, Carroll County,

Montgomery County and many other places.

If fishing is your game, check out Bobby Cleveland's article "Seeing Red" and head to Bay St. Louis with Cleveland for a quick limit, and then head to the Biloxi Marsh for trophy redfish. Cleveland lets the readers in on an often-overlooked hot saltwater fishing time

when many anglers have stowed away their gear and headed to the woods.

John Felsher treats us with some good news in "From whiskers to waterfowl". Abandoned catfish ponds can make for some outstanding duck hunting with just a little elbow grease. Here's how-to pick-up mallards and maybe even a few other species of ducks where channel cats once thrived. Where once there was only whiskers, now there are ducks aplenty, ripe for the taking if you know how to transform those catfish havens to duck heaven.

Are you a die-hard angler and looking for a few more fish to close the year out then look no further than Felsher's "Catch cold crappie" article as he lets out a not-so-secret tidbit about cold weather fishing on relatively deserted public waters. While Mississippi lakes are mostly empty of fishermen come winter, they're still full of slabs. Here's how a handful of pros fill their coolers when the weather's cold.

As the year is winding down, many die-hard deer hunters are just gearing up for some fantastic, late-season deer hunting. Read along as I gives you a view of how expert deer hunter Chris Roberts puts in a little "Detective work for big deer". As Mississippi's season progresses, deer hunters need to know where their targets are. Have they changed areas? Have they gone nocturnal? This answer my friend is blowing in the wind as big bucks are chasing those hot mamas! Read along and you just might learn a few things about how to locate and harvest late season trophy bucks! ■



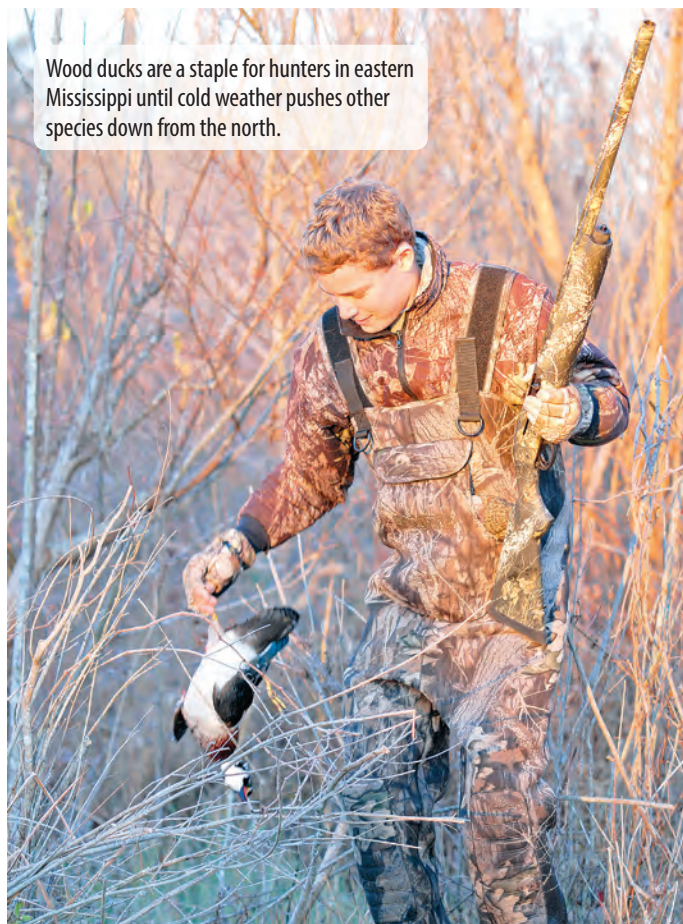
Dan Kibler

Crappie fishing doesn't end when deer season begins. Plenty of Mississippi slabs are ready to go in your cooler if you know a few tricks.

DUCK SEASON RETURNS IN DECEMBER

MISSISSIPPI HUNTERS HEAD FOR PONDS, SWAMPS AS THE MIGRATION INTENSIFIES

A group of wood ducks suddenly filled the early morning sky as they dipped, darted and buzzed through the trees at breakneck speed. Just as quickly, they put down their landing gear and crashed into the water. In a split second they exploded off the water, trying to make a quick retreat.



Wood ducks are a staple for hunters in eastern Mississippi until cold weather pushes other species down from the north.

"Boom, boom, boom!" Shotguns roared, and ducks dropped from the sky as a group of hunters opened up and sent out a volley that most didn't escape. The action was fast and furious for Greg Tabb and his duck-hunting companions, but they made the most of it as it didn't last long.

"We're excited about another good duck season coming on this winter," Tabb said. "You need food for the ducks and cold weather to push them down here, and we've got the food planted and

DOVE SEASON IS BACK

Greg Tabb and a few other diehard hunters also love to hunt doves during the late season, as it provides some fast and furious action when most people have gone to the woods in search of bucks and small game.

That takes some of the pressure off the doves and gives hunters an opportunity to experience some of the most-fantastic dove hunting you'll ever experience.

Hunters in the Northern zone have a Dec. 25-Jan. 9 season, while hunters in the South zone can take doves Dec. 19-Jan. 31.

You can harvest doves almost anywhere in Mississippi where there's an abundance of natural food, the Delta is still king of late-season dove hunting. Many landowners prepare late-season crops specifically for doves and a few even have dove-hunting clubs or leases that they make available for a price. They usually keep up with which fields doves are using and keep their hunters in spots where the doves are concentrated.

There's nothing quite as exciting as shooting mature, migratory doves that have come down from up north; they are typically bigger and make great sport. If you don't have access to Delta hunting, then check out cutovers and areas that have a new growth of wildflowers and seeds. After the plants die, they put out thousands of seeds that doves love, and you can have quite a good hunt when they're feeding on those dried seeds.

If you're looking for fast paced dove hunting action, then late season dove hunting is just the ticket. ■

just need the cold weather."

The second segment of Mississippi's duck season doesn't last too long, opening Dec. 3 and running through Dec. 5. The third season, however, is much longer, opening Dec. 9 and running through Jan. 31. The daily limit is six ducks.

Tabb hunts in the eastern part of the state in Lauderdale County, targeting ducks that come down the Mississippi flyway. He and his crew hunt beaver ponds, sloughs and creek bottoms, targeting wood ducks, mergansers and occasionally a few mallards. While they are not on the main flyway, they get a lot of shooting when the cold weather pushes ducks down.

"Ninety percent of our ducks are going to be wood ducks," Tabb said. "Woodies will always come, but we need cold weather to drive the other ducks down here. We spend a lot of time planting beaver ponds and sloughs when they are dry, and then we close up some of the drainage pipes to give the ducks water to access the food."

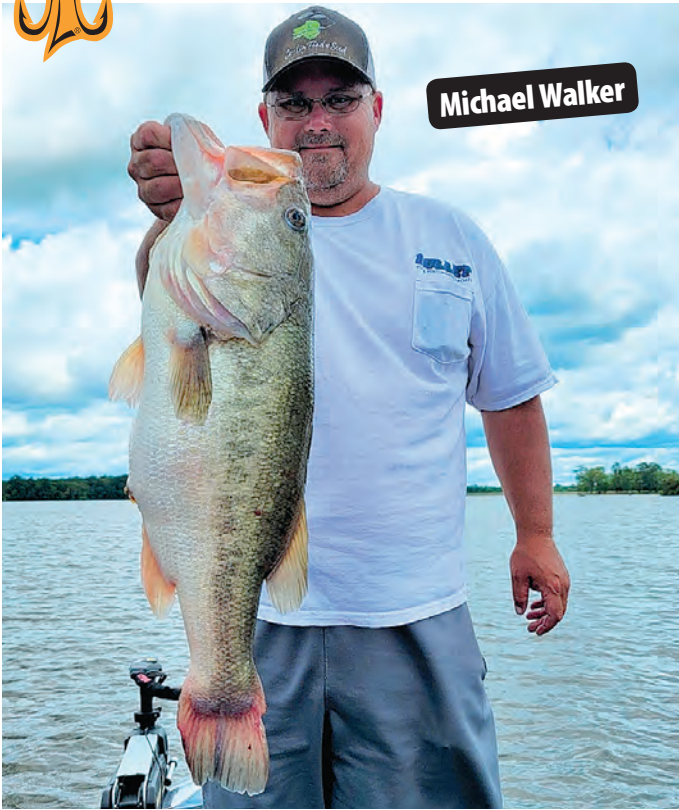
Tabb plants Japanese millet, Egyptian wheat and rice grains to help hold a few ducks and give them something to eat as they migrate.

Tabb enjoys the fast and furious duck hunting that he gets when the ducks are here, and after the hunt, he trains and works his German shorthaired pointers.

"I'm excited about the upcoming season and the possibilities we'll have but I also like to work those dogs and see them retrieve and do what they love to do," Tabb said. ■



HUNTING/FISHING SCRAPBOOK



Michael Walker

Michael Walker caught this 8-pound, 9-ounce bass at Lake Lincoln State Park in Wesson on June 19, 2021.



Hollis Arnemann

Hollis Arnemann shows off a 350-pound red stag he shot with a Ruger Scout .308 at a ranch in Mississippi. He shot his first deer, hunting with his father, for his seventh birthday.



Ed, Manning Moody

Ed and Manning Moody tagged out this year for alligator season 2021.



Cole Blanchard

Cole Blanchard poses with his first deer.

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Todd Irwin's huge 8-point buck, killed near Camden in Madison County, scored 150 inches with a 20-inch inside spread.

IRWIN DOWNS ONE-EYED, MONSTER MADISON COUNTY 8-POINTER

A By Mike Giles

monster buck nicknamed "Blinky" entered Todd Irwin's world in July when he moved in and was captured by game cameras. The buck was an 8-pointer, and Irwin, from Gluckstadt, hadn't been able to hunt him much.

Irwin's hunting buddy, Hunter Farrell, was spending a lot of time hunting Blinky, but he hadn't gotten a shot, either.

"I got him on camera coming through a food plot about 7:30 one morning," Irwin said. "I run Covert cameras, and I thought he went back into the bottom, so I had a change of plans and went hunting that afternoon. As I walked in the wind was perfect, blowing towards the area I'd just came in from."

Irwin got into his Summit Viper stand and climbed 30 feet high around 3:30 the afternoon of Oct. 29, but things were slow until 5:50. Blinky came across a lane and stood broadside for just a minute, looking towards the food plot. The buck circled back around and walked out in front of him at 21.8 yards.

"Thwack!" Irwin's broadhead smacked the buck, and it took off, running just out of sight before collapsing.

IMPRESSIVE 8-POINT

The buck's 8-point rack had an inside spread of 20 inches, an outside spread of 22¼ inches, and it and rough-scored 150, which is about as high as any 8-point buck you'll ever see in Mississippi.

"We'd never killed a buck anywhere near this size on our property near Camden," Irwin said. "My mother bought the property about 4 years ago, and we'd killed some good turkeys there and a few deer, but the largest I'd killed was a 128-inch buck last year, my biggest by far at the time."

Irwin killed his first deer with a bow when he was about 12, and he's been hooked ever since.

"Blinky was blind in one eye, and we'd gotten hundreds of photos of him at night, and only one of his eyes would shine," Irwin said. "We saw him following some does into the same food plot on camera late last year, but we never saw him while hunting



**ON THE
COVER**

and don't know where he came from. My neighbor, Jay Albritton, owns 120 acres next door, and he knew about the deer. The deer was bedding on his property, too.

"Everything just felt right during the hunt," Irwin said. "Harper Farrell was hunting another stand with me, and he was supposed to kill that deer; he'd been after him so long. I would have been just as happy if he'd killed it. I was just lucky, but it feels like winning the Super Bowl!"

FINDING THE DEER

Farrell made his way to the scene of the shot pretty quickly and asked Irwin if he was sure that he hit him.

"I saw the arrow strike him in the rib cage and heard the arrow hitting brush as it ran away," Irwin said. "We walked about 5 yards and Harper found some blood. We trailed him about 75 yards and stopped because we didn't want to push him if it wasn't a good hit. Harper kept walking towards the deer, slowly trailing blood, however.

"Dead deer, dead deer, white belly, you got him," Farrell said.

"We found him in a creek bed," Irwin said. "It's a memory that will last a lifetime; that's for sure!"

If Irwin hadn't gotten a cell-phone text picture, he may never have hunted that day.

"I saw he was moving, so it was a no-brainer," said Irwin. "I changed plans, and it worked out." ■



BOWHUNTER ARROWS 'MEGATRON' IN ADAMS COUNTY

Becky Nicosia's huge Adams County buck made a fatal mistake on Oct. 16: getting too close to her stand.

By Mike Giles
Becky Nicosia of Baton Rouge, La., climbed into her 20-foot ladder stand about 2:30 on Oct. 16 and settled in for an afternoon hunt on land she owns in Adams County. She knew a big buck, a 160-inch monster nicknamed "Megatron" was using the area, but she hadn't gotten a shot.

Several does came into view at the edge of her food plot and started browsing.

"I saw a few does and then saw Megatron come out and start walking towards me," said Nicosia, who shoots a Mathews Chill SDX with a peep sight and one pin. She uses a rangefinder to range shots around her stand and mentally marks her kill zone at 30 yards.

"Megatron got within range, but suddenly turned and started walking away. He looked back for just a second, and I let the arrow fly."

Nicosia shoots Easton Axis arrows tipped with 100-grain Wasp broadheads. Her shot hit home, and the buck ran about 50 yards and piled up.

Sporting 13 points and weighing 185 pounds, the buck was rough-scored at more than 160 inches.

THE RIGHT TIME

Nicosia has been bowhunting for 30 years and is an expert archer and hunter; people who know her were not surprised that she passed up this same buck last season. Dead deer don't grow bigger antlers; that's something Nicosia and her husband, Donnie, keep in mind while managing their property and deer herd.

"We've been watching this buck for three years," Nicosia said. "We have been putting out Antler Max attractant as a supplemental feed during the spring and summer.

The supplemental feed with protein supplements really puts on the antler growth. We only shoot mature bucks or cull racks if we see they're not growing bigger.

"I videoed him last year because he had so much potential," she said. "He was about a 138-inch 10-point last year, and this year, we estimated that he'd grown into the 160-inch range with 13 points, so

we were going to try and harvest him if we got an opportunity."

MANAGEMENT TIPS

When you manage a hunting property for older, mature deer you've got to shoot a lot of does, and Nicosia usually shoots a few with her bow each season.

"We manage the property and pick out the ones we want to shoot and the ones we want to let grow," Nicosia said. "Last year, I saw the buck we named Megatron on my mom's favorite stand, called 'Boot's Hill.' I got him on video twice last year feeding in the foot plot and eating acorns."

Nicosia saw Megatron the second week of bow season, but he got no closer than 50 yards, so she didn't shoot.

"I have a bow shop and teach archery and sell a few bows," said Nicosia. "I grew up hunting with my dad, Doc Harvey, and killed my first deer with him in my late 20s. I just love hunting with a bow." ■

CARROLL COUNTY BUCK IS HUNTER'S THIRD 'RECENT' TROPHY

M By Mike Giles
 att Langford of Petal got to his hunting camp late on the afternoon of Oct. 12, filled with excitement. He had harvested 171-inch and 150-inch bucks last season, and the promise of more big bucks enticed him to get back into the woods. Brimming with anticipation, Langford stepped into his Viper stand and climbed high in a tree early the next morning.

"I hunted an open, hardwood bottom next to a soybean field," Langford said. "I spotted a buck coming through the open woods and heading my way. He was on a collision course with me but suddenly locked up and looked directly at me as he walked downwind of me. He was alert, and I could tell by his body language that he was about to leave, so I pulled to full draw and released my arrow."

"Whap!" Langford's arrow smacked the buck right above his shoulder and cut two arteries. The buck was dead on his feet, but he ran until the blood pumped out about 75 yards from the place he was shot.

"When the arrow and broadhead made the classic 'thud' upon impact, I knew that I had made a good shot," Langford said.

The trophy buck sported a rocking-chair rack with 11 points and long, thick tines. It scored 137 inches with a 16½-inch spread and 5⅞-inch and 5¾-inch bases.

GOOD GROWTH

Langford was hunting in the edge of the Delta in Carroll County; his camp is next to agricultural fields, and the soybeans had evidently resulted in some serious growth on some of the bucks.

"I normally like to shoot deer inside of 30 yards, but I'm dialed in up to 50 yards," Langford said. "I practice some at that range each year, so I'm confident that I can make a killing shot up to 50 yards."

Matt Langford of Petal harvested this impressive 11-point buck at his hunting camp in Carroll County on Oct. 12.



Langford was shooting an Elite Energy 32 bow with a Slick Trick Traditional 4-blade broadhead on a Micro diameter Easton Access Long Range arrow.

Langford and a couple of his hunting buddies were bowhunting on the morning of his kill, and the 48-degree temperature had the deer moving. They had gotten a couple of pictures of the bucks 2 weeks before, and he had not been using the area regularly, but Langford picked a great stand location and it paid off. ■

KILMICHAEL HUNTER DROPS BIG CROSSBOW WHITETAIL

H By Mike Giles

unter Dees of Kilmichael went to the woods with his wife to try and find her a crossbow buck. Rachel Dees got into bowhunting last year and wanted to get one to hang on the wall.

On Oct. 1, they got into a ground blind on Montgomery County property belonging to his grandparents and waited for action.

"Rachel tapped me on the shoulder and told me she saw something walking," Dees said. "I told her to get ready, and then she saw the 10-point I had been after last year. She said she was going to let me shoot him. The deer kept feeding towards us, and I shot him at 10 yards with Rachel's Mathews Mission Sub-1 crossbow when he turned broadside."

The buck only ran about 50 yards and collapsed.

The Montgomery County buck, Dees's first with a crossbow, had 10 points with a 17-inch spread, 21-inch main beams and 5¼-inch bases.

"When I saw him run away, I thought I'd made a bad shot," Dees said. "We waited about 35 to 45 minutes and when out to look for him, and I found about 3 to 4 inches of the arrow. I'd grazed him just behind the shoulder and the arrow was just sticking out the other side. We only walked about 30 yards from the shot when we saw him laying up there dead."

IMPROVING HABITAT

Rachel Dees had killed her first deer last year on the same land where Dees had killed his first deer.

"It shocked me that she wanted me to shoot it," Dees said. "She's always wanted to hang one on the wall, and she hadn't killed a good buck yet, but she wanted me to kill him. We got pictures of the buck last year in the first week of January, but I only had a week to hunt, and I never saw him while hunting. The buck was a 10-point with about 120 inches of antler then."

This year, they put the cameras out the first of August but didn't get any pictures of him. The next-to-last week in September, they got a nice 7-point on camera but still hadn't seen the 10-point buck.

"Opening week of bow season, we put up a ground blind out that Monday," Dees said. "The buck showed up on camera the next day, which was a Tuesday."

Dees killed the buck on his grandparents' place, where they'd been improving the habitat the past couple of years. There was

Hunter Dees of Kilmichael got his first crossbow buck in Montgomery County on Oct. 1.



a lot of kudzu on a ridge, and the neighbors had an oak bottom with a lot of acorn forage.

"We planted a 3-way game mix in the food plot, and we caught him coming out feeding towards the oak bottom at about 5:30 p.m. I shot him at 5:50," Dees said. ■



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SON'S WHISPERS GUIDE FATHER TO **BIG BUCK**

Dr. By Glynn Harris
Michael O'Neal would no doubt have killed a big, 12-point buck even without whispered instructions from his 7-year-old son, Wesley, but the fact that the youngster was there with him added something extra to the hunt.

O'Neal, an internal medicine physician who works Ochsner Health Center in Monroe, La., had his son with him on Oct. 9 on Ashbrook Island, an island in Mississippi along the Mississippi

River, a hunting club in which he holds membership.

"I was targeting a buck that first showed up on our cameras in 2017 as a 10-point," O'Neal said. "He was a 10-point the following year, and then in 2019, he had developed two 'kickers' that carried over to this season."

Around 4:15 on the afternoon of Oct. 9, O'Neal had his son with him and chose to hunt from a lock-on stand that overlooked several persimmon trees that were producing fruit, a favorite food for deer.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Michael O'Neal got some help from his son, Wesley, to take down this 12-point trophy buck on Ashbrook Island.

"There were actually two lock-on stands in a tree, and I got Wesley tied in and secured on one of the stands, while I got in the other just above where he sat," O'Neal said. "I had been teaching him about the age difference in deer, and that afternoon, we got to see several of different ages as the deer began showing up to feed on the persimmons."

AGING DEER

With the first deer showing up within minutes after settling into their stands, the father and son got to speculate on the ages of the bucks.

"We had a small 6-point, and then another little 8-point show up, and Wesley was whispering to me correctly that these bucks were immature," O'Neal said. "Later, I saw a bigger deer standing behind some brush at around 50 yards and when it stepped out, Wesley whispered, 'Dad, that's a mature buck.' He had my phone and began videoing the buck as it approached the persimmon tree. When it got there, Wesley whispered, 'Dad, you gotta shoot this one; he's mature.'"

A BRANCH INTERVENES

The youngster became impatient and wondered why his father hadn't taken a shot at the buck, but there was a slight problem.

"Wesley had a good clear view of the deer but there was a small branch in the way obscuring my visibility," O'Neal said. "When the buck finally stepped out from behind the branch at 18 yards, I released the arrow."

O'Neal shoots a Mathews bow and uses Gold Tip arrows and Rage broadheads. His shot was dead on as the buck only ran 25 yards before tipping over.

The buck, estimated to be 7½ years old, had lost weight over the years and weighed 199 pounds. The rack was a main frame 10-point with two sticker points. The inside spread was 19 inches, main beams 22 inches each with

good mass throughout the rack. The buck was green scored at 149⅞ inches.

"This hunt would not have been nearly as special had Wesley not been there with me to witness the whole thing," O'Neal said. "When we got down, he wanted to follow the blood trail even though the deer had fallen within sight of us. When it was all over, he said, 'Dad, I was your good luck charm today, and I think this is my favorite memory of all time.' ■

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Chris Roberts's quest for a particular buck that had been appearing on his game cameras was wearing thin when he got in his stand in south Lauderdale County last winter.

The buck had disappeared about a week before, so Roberts decided to hunt a different area; the weather was right and the wind coming from the right direction. About 4 p.m., a tall-racked buck stepped into a shooting lane, and Roberts quickly shouldered his rifle, centered the crosshairs and squeezed the trigger in one fluid motion.

"Tic-Boom!" roared his .308 as the bullet struck home, and the buck collapsed instantly. The 180-pound buck sported eight points with long tines and scored 132%.

"I'd hunted this buck for a couple years," Roberts said. "After I killed him, I checked the cameras and found that he had been there the night before and several times in the previous days. He'd left his normal zone, retreating to a less-pressured area."

Roberts, from Collinsville, is a lifelong hunter and sales rep for Tecomate Wildlife Systems who grew up hunting high-pressured whitetails in east Mississippi and west Alabama.

"I started hunting that buck in the fall of 2019, but he only moved at night," Roberts said. "He

showed up on the game camera last fall again, and we got a lot of pictures of him, so I started hunting him again. He disappeared for a while, so that's when I changed hunting areas."


Roberts had bush-hogged a lane on the north end of his property in September; he discovered that the buck was using that area in late December.

"I hunted him as much as possible without putting too much pressure on him," he said. "We try to keep our hunting areas as undisturbed as possible, and that's probably why he'd retreated to an area that hadn't had a lot of hunter activity."

"During the early part of December, we'll start seeing some scraping and rutting activity, but I will focus on food sources like food plots and acorn trees," Roberts said. "I'll focus on the food sources closest to the bedding areas. We try to catch some of the first bucks looking for does in estrus, and you will find does near the food."

A typical area would have an acorn bottom bordered by a pine thicket or thick cutover that would serve as ideal bedding grounds. Roberts likes to work the edge of the thickets and catch bucks as they leave the bedding area, before it gets too dark to shoot.

FOOD PLOTS >



AS MISSISSIPPI'S SEASON PROGRESSES, DEER HUNTERS NEED TO KNOW WHERE THEIR TARGETS ARE. HAVE THEY CHANGED AREAS? HAVE THEY GONE NOCTURNAL? ■ By Mike Giles

**DETECTIVE
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FOOD PLOTS

In areas like east Mississippi, where you have a lot of red-clay soil, pine timber and cutovers with few mast-producing trees, food plots become a vital part of the equation; they can help the deer herd year-round.

“My preference is to have a rectangle-shaped food plot — the bigger the better,” Roberts said. “You will feed more deer by having a bigger plot; thus, you will probably hold more deer in the area and see more of them during the winter. Deer are edge feeders, and they feel more comfortable coming out into bigger fields. I’d say that plots need to be at least an acre, and several acres if possible.”

Roberts prefers a couple of different Tecomate seed mixes, including Max-Attract, a blend of winter wheat, winter peas, forage oats, clover and chicory. It’s a mix that’s high in clover and chicory, which sets it apart from other mixes.

Another mix he prefers is called Greenfield, which is a fall annual and has brassicas: big, leafy turnips, rape and other broadleaves.

“Deer will forage on Greenfield during the early season, but after you get a frost, they will really shine during late season,” Roberts said. “The sugar will go to the leaves, and the deer will

also dig up the roots and eat them. This blend is good year-round due to the perennials.

“Lanes are good for hunting and being able to see further in thick areas, but they’re not particularly good for feeding a lot of deer,” he said. “I killed the buck we discussed as it was crossing a lane, but he wasn’t feeding.”

SCRAPES

There was a scrape on the edge of the lane, and Roberts had previously set up a camera on the scrape; the buck was crossing the lane going from his bedding area in the pine thicket to his feeding ground.

“Scrapes are a good resource on finding out what you have in an area,” Roberts said, “but they’re not particularly good places to hunt. Almost every buck that comes by will visit the scrapes and leave their scent, but they may not frequent the scrape regularly enough to pattern them. I still prefer hunting as close to the food areas that are closest to bedding areas, because the bucks don’t like to move a lot during the daylight hours after gun season is in full swing.

Food plots that cover at least an acre, often much larger, will turn a deer’s head in December when natural foods start to disappear.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Keeping the wind direction in his favor is Chris Roberts’s No. 1 tactic any time he heads to the woods hunting deer.



HUNTING BY THE WIND

"I don't wear any special type of scent-control clothing or anything," Roberts said. "I just try to stay as clean as I can, keep my boots as clean as possible, wash my clothes in non-scented detergent and let them air dry. But the main thing is, I keep the wind in my favor no matter where I'm going to hunt. If the wind is blowing from my stand towards the direction the deer come from, then I'll hunt a different stand that day or move a portable stand to a different spot in the area so my scent won't blow across their trail."

It only takes a big buck getting a whiff or two of human scent to send them to another locale.

When it comes to hunting and fooling wise, old bucks, you can never forget which direction the wind is blowing during your hunt, or you might not see hide nor hair if deer are crossing or approaching down-wind. Before picking your stand, check the wind direction before every hunt.

HUNTING MIDDAY >



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HUNTING MIDDAY

By mid- to late December, hunters in parts of Mississippi will see rutting activity almost any time of the day or night, so it's good to vary hunting tactics and times. Hunters try to pattern deer; that's why they hunt food plots late in the afternoon or acorn bottoms early in the morning. While they are both good bets most of the time, deer can also pattern hunters if they do the same thing day after day.

When hunters head to stands before daylight, go back to camp after a couple hours, then head out for the afternoon hunt, deer may pattern them and feed at times when hunters aren't there — or just wait until after dark.

During many late December or January hunts, I've harvested quality bucks during the mid-morning after discovering deer moving while I was scouting for sign. On more than one occasion, I've had bucks walk right up to me between 9:30 to 11:30. While I was originally surprised, I've since learned that the deer usually have patterned hunters by mid-season where there is regular activity, and many feed openly when the woods go silent.

IN-SEASON SCOUTING

While many hunters use trail cameras to locate deer before the season and around food plots or feeding locations, they may not use them in the most-productive areas. If bucks are appearing on cameras after dark, hunters need to know where they are during the daylight hours. To learn that, you need to find trails that are heavily used during the period of time when you are hunting.

Locate trails crossing creeks or streams, active scrapes and streamside management zones and put cameras on them. I use a Moultrie XA-6000, which sends the photos to an APP or to my computer. It will also send the pictures to my cell phone, but I'd rather check my phone APP. If you have the camera set up on areas like this, you can pattern bucks and know instantly when they are moving during daylight hours.



After interviewing successful hunters over the past few years I've learned that time is my most-valuable resource, so I want to hunt when bucks are moving. The new generation of cameras allows you to know when that time is without having to go into the woods to check them. In Lauderdale County where I live, bucks start looking for does around Christmas, and the daylight rutting activity just increases through the first 10 days of January.

I've captured many daylight pictures of bucks, deer I'd only seen on film after dark since before the gun season opened. Last year, I harvested my first buck on Christmas Eve and followed that up with a couple more in January, in large part by hunting when and where I knew the bucks were moving. ■

STICKS & STRINGS >

Trail cameras can give you advance notice about deer movements and timing, either before or during the season. **ABOVE:** Map out places that deer are using and natural travel corridors between feeding and bedding areas.



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





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STICKS AND STRINGS

Sammy Romano

Sammy Romano



A dry fire can be devastating to a bow setup.

DRY FIRES SET FIRE TO PLENTY OF BOWS

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

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

His bow was dry-fired by a "buddy" with whom he was practicing. Until he gets here, I'm not even sure if I have all of the parts I'll need to repair the bow. This will be the fourth or fifth dry-fired/derailed bow I have repaired just before someone's major hunting trip this week.

It seems ignorance is winning the war over common sense, so this inspired me to write about some of these incidents in the hopes of saving someone else from being put in the horrible situation these guys are in.

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

NO DRY FIRES, EVER

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

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

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

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

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

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

BOOZE? NO BOWS

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

TUNE UP, TUNE OUT

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Sammy Romano

HUNTING SEASONS

SPECIES	SEASON DATES	BAG LIMIT	POSSESSION
Doves	Sept. 4-Oct. 17(n), Sept. 4-19 (s) Oct. 30-Nov. 28 (n), Oct. 9-Nov. 7 (s) Dec. 25-Jan. 9 (n), Dec. 19-Jan. 31 (s)	15	45
Quail	Nov. 25-March 5	8	
Rabbit	Oct. 16-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) Nov. 1-Feb. 28 (food/sport/pelt)	5/day, 8/party No limit	
Rails			
King & Clapper	Sept. 1-Oct. 3, Nov. 26-Jan. 1	15	45
Sora & Virginia	Sept. 1-Oct. 3, Nov. 26-Jan. 1	25	75
Gallinules	Sept. 1-Oct. 3, Nov. 26-Jan. 1	15	45
Snipe	Nov. 14 - Feb. 28	8	24
Crow	Nov. 6 - 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. 11-26 Nov. 26-28, Dec. 3-5 Dec. 9-Jan. 31	6 6
Geese (Canada, blue, Ross, white-fronted, brant)	Sept. 1-30 Nov. 12-28, Dec. 3-5, Dec. 9-Jan. 31	5 Canada 3, Brant 1 Snow/blue/Ross 20 White-fronted 3
Light Geese conservation	Oct. 1-Nov. 11, Nov. 29-Dec. 2 Dec. 6-8, Feb. 1-4, Feb. 7-March 31 Feb. 8-March 31	No limit

DEER SEASON

ZONE	ARCHERY	PRIM WEAPON	GUNS
Northeast	Oct. 1-Nov. 19	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 20-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Nov. 8-19 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Jan. 20-31 (archery/primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan. 19(dogs) Nov. 6-19 (youth)
East Central	Oct. 1-Nov. 19	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 20-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Nov. 8-19 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Jan. 20-31 (archery-primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan. 19(dogs) Nov. 6-19 (youth)
Southwest	Oct. 1-Nov. 19	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 20-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Nov. 8-19 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Jan. 20-31 (archery-primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan. 19(dogs) Nov. 6-Jan. 19 (youth)
Southeast	Oct. 15-Nov. 19	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 20-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. 19	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 20-Dec. 1 (dogs)
		Nov. 9-20 (antlerless primitive weapon)	
	Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)		Jan. 20-31 (archery primitive weapon)
			Dec. 24-Jan. 19(dogs) Nov. 6-Jan. 19 (youth)

■ By John N. Felsher

ABANDONED CATFISH PONDS CAN MAKE FOR SOME OUTSTANDING DUCK HUNTING WITH JUST A LITTLE ELBOW GREASE. HERE'S HOW TO PICK UP MALLARDS WHERE CHANNEL CATS ONCE THRIVED.

Crouching in high grass and brush growing along a low embankment, we listened to whistling wings circling unseen above us as we counted down the minutes before legal shooting hours began. A leaden, overcast sky made the black forms hurtling past us in the gloom even more difficult to see. Occasionally, we heard something splash into the water.

"It's time," whispered a companion. "More birds coming in. Teal heading straight for us. Take 'em!"

Similar scenes occur every morning in marshes, swamps, lakes, rivers and flooded fields across Mississippi during waterfowl season, but some of the best duck hunting could come in unexpected places: catfish ponds.

Mississippi leads the nation in catfish production. In some years, the Magnolia State accounts for about 55% of the catfish raised in the United States. However, Mississippi catfish farmers face a host of worsening problems, such as rising fuel costs, high feed prices and increasing competition from cheaper imports. In 2001, Mississippi had 130,500 acres of catfish ponds. By 2017, it had 34,700 acres of catfish ponds, a drop of 74%. Cheaper fuel prices and a stronger economy helped create a slight uptick in pond acreage by 2019, but catfish farmers still face many hardships.

Bad news for catfish farmers means outstanding opportunities for duck hunters. When building a catfish farm, the landowner normally digs a series of shallow ponds or simply impounds natural low spots by building levees and pumping water from nearby sources. Sometimes, farmers dam streams to create ponds.

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a camouflage jacket and a green cap, stands in a marshy area. He is holding a shotgun over his shoulder and a mallard duck in his hand. The background shows a body of water and some reeds.

FROM WHISKERS TO WATERFOWL

NATURAL PROGRESSION

When landowners get out of the catfish business, they often abandon their ponds to the elements. Since the ponds are on private land, few people ever visit them or even know they exist. Over the years, the fertile pond bottoms grow up in willows, native grasses and aquatic plants, while banks grow thick with canes and brush. In fertile soil, willow trees can grow 6 to 8 feet in a year. Vegetation provides food for ducks; shoreline growth gives birds cover from raptors and other predators. Even without human enhancement, these overgrown former aquaculture endeavors can become waterfowl havens.

“We hunt many areas that were once commercial aquaculture facilities,” said Jacob Sartain of Sartain’s Heritage Properties, an avid duck hunter from Madison who buys, sells and enhances properties specifically for waterfowl hunting. “An old, fish-pond complex makes ideal waterfowl habitat. Catfish ponds can provide natural waterfowl habitat without much being done to

them, but I prefer to manage them intensively.”

Some landowners hunt their own ponds or lease them to get back some of the money they invested in the properties. Sometimes, farmers sell their properties. Hunters who buy such operations can manipulate and manage them to create even better waterfowl habitat.

Most of these old aquaculture operations come with water-control systems, piping, pumps, easy access and other infrastructure that make them very attractive to someone who wants to make a waterfowl paradise. With a little habitat manipulation and repairs to existing infrastructure, a landowner can turn an old catfish farm into an incredible hunting spot.

“From a development standpoint, I’m really fond of abandoned fish ponds, because we can manipulate the habitat specifically for waterfowl,” Sartain said. “It’s much easier to manage an old catfish farm and turn it into duck habitat than flooded timber or row-crop land. It has levees with individual pond units, wells and irrigation systems already in place. Access to those places is usually very easy because of the road systems and levees. We can drive a pickup truck down the levee, unload the gear and start hunting.”

Jacob Sartain and Will Murray arrange decoys for a hunt at a reclaimed catfish pond near Greenwood.

THE DELTA FACTOR >



THE DELTA FACTOR

Most catfish production occurs in the Delta, where farmers enjoy abundant freshwater sources, rich clay soil on flat land and good growing conditions. The Delta covers nearly 7,000 square miles of the Mississippi River Alluvial Valley, one of the most-critical wintering waterfowl habitats in North America. The Delta runs about 200 miles along the eastern bank of the Mississippi River and includes all or parts of 19 counties between Vicksburg and the Tennessee state line.

“The east side of the Mississippi River has some very good waterfowl hunting,” said Houston Havens, waterfowl program coordinator for the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks. “The best duck hunting in Mississippi occurs in the Delta region. It all depends upon the water conditions and how many birds came down the river. In the Delta,

people kill many mallards, but they also kill a lot of gadwalls, green-winged teal and shovelers.”

Many reclaimed catfish farms in northwest Mississippi now offer sportsmen some of the best duck hunting in the nation. The former catfish ponds attract a variety of both puddle and diving ducks. The region historically holds one of the highest winter concentrations of mallards in North America, but sportsmen might spot anything that could fly through the lower Mississippi Flyway. Besides mallards, a morning bag could also include gadwalls, green-winged teal and wigeon. Sportsmen might also shoot blue-winged teal, pintails, shovelers, lesser scaup, ring-necked ducks, occasional redheads or canvasbacks and other ducks. In more-timbered areas, wood ducks comprise a large part of the harvest. In some areas, sportsmen might also get shots at passing snow, blue, Ross or specklebelly geese.



“Waterfowl hunting in the Delta is extremely good,” Sartain said. “This part of Mississippi offers very rich and diverse habitat for hunting ducks. When the Arkansas swamps freeze, a lot of ducks cross over to our side of the river. Also, when bad storms hit south Louisiana, ducks leave the coast and come up here. Our best hunting typically occurs after southwest weather fronts push ducks out of the Gulf region and up into the Delta.”

KEEP COVER, BUILD BLINDS >

Jim Murray shows off a drake redhead he shot during a hunt at a reclaimed catfish pond. Mississippi hunters usually kill a variety of puddle ducks, but an occasional diver drops in. **BELOW:** Jacob Sartain waits for more ducks to come into range during a hunt at a reclaimed catfish pond.



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KEEP COVER, BUILD BLINDS

Sportsmen can hunt reclaimed catfish ponds like they do any other small system. Many landowners keep some willow or brush thickets growing in the pond to provide duck cover. Some people create blinds in these thickets or simply stand among the brush and trees in waders. Cut down unnecessary brush to create open areas on the pond's surface for landing zones and decoy spreads. Also, keep or enhance shoreline brush, canes and other vegetation for concealment.

Some hunters establish permanent pit or platform blinds along shorelines or hide in the thick, native cover. Some buy or lease several pond units and keep a portion of them idle every hunting season to serve as refuges so more waterfowl stay in an area.

During the season, scout the designated ponds to pick the best one for shooting that day. Don't hunt any pond too frequently to avoid over-pressuring the birds. When rotating among multiple ponds, many hunters erect portable blinds in the spot with the most favorable wind that morning. Also, watch for the dominant duck species in the area at that time and toss out decoys to fit those birds. For instance, in a pond

that mostly attracts gadwalls, use gadwall decoys with a smattering of other types. This gives birds a different look each day to keep them guessing. Hunters don't want ducks to become too familiar with blind locations or see the same decoy spreads each day.

DUCK POND BLUEPRINT

Before people can hunt an old catfish pond, they need to do some work. To turn an abandoned aquaculture operation into a waterfowl heaven, first repair access roads and levees. Then, repair or replace pumps, pipes and water-control structures or perform other maintenance as needed. Next, drain the old pond, thin or remove existing brush so ducks can land in open water and plant native food sources for the birds.

"Some old catfish farms turn into really good duck hunting properties," said Tim Willis, a Ducks Unlimited biologist from Ridgeland. "They attract a lot of different species. Most of the levees and infrastructure are already in place on these properties; it's just a matter of replacing or repairing what's necessary and manipulating the property. If people start managing these properties for moist-soil plants, they can produce a lot of waterfowl food."



Will Murray retrieves a specklebelly goose, a target of opportunity that flew in to a reclaimed catfish pond. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Will Murray, Jacob Sartain and Jim Murray show off a green-winged teal, gadwall and redhead killed on a hunt at a reclaimed catfish pond.



During the spring, completely drain the ponds and plant duck foods. Check with the state to make sure your improvements are legal. Native grasses and other vegetation will also grow up. Before duck season begins, reflood the ponds to about 2 to 3 feet deep.

To convert old catfish ponds into enhanced waterfowl habitat, land managers can possibly get grants from conservation groups like DU or government agencies. Many landowners enroll their property in the Wetland Reserve Program.

Mississippi sportsmen can also get technical assistance from state wildlife biologists. The MDWFP provides free technical advice to landowners who want to enhance their properties for waterfowl and wetland management. ■

To reach Jacob Sartain of Sartain's Heritage, call 601-856-2720 or visit www.SartainsHeritage.com.

For assistance from the MDWFP on converting catfish ponds to duck hunting spots, call biologist Houston Havens at 662-299-0273 or email Houston.Havens@wfp.ms.gov.



John N. Felsher is a professional freelance writer and photographer with more than 1,700 articles in more than 117 magazines to his credit. He worked as the outdoors editor for several Louisiana newspapers and currently co-hosts a weekly outdoors radio show on WNSP 105.5 FM in Mobile, Ala. You can contact him at JohnNFelsher.com.

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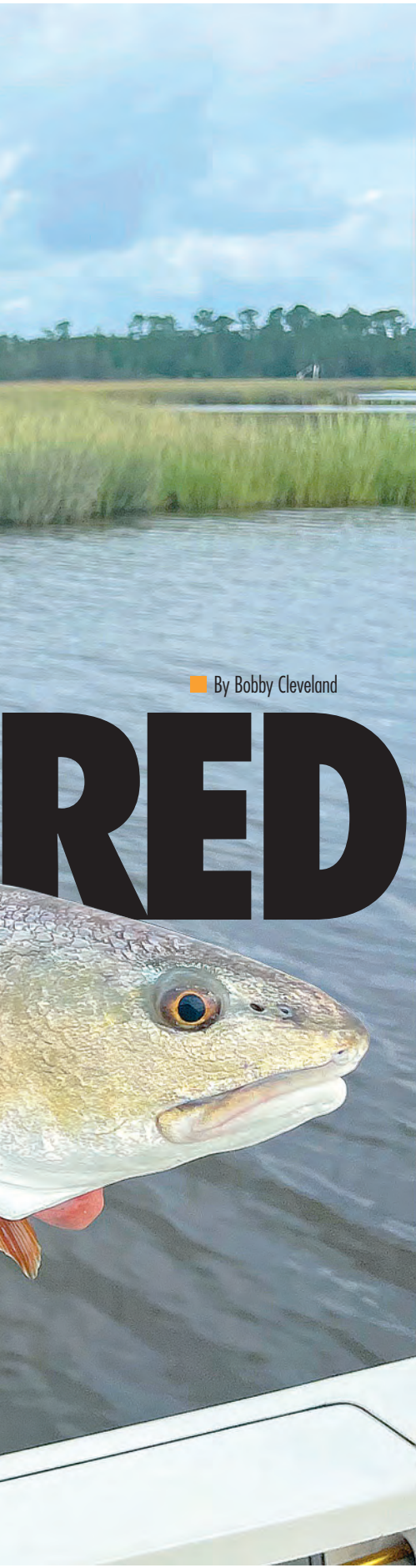
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HEAD TO THE BAY FOR A QUICK LIMIT OF DECEMBER REDFISH; HEAD TO THE MARSH FOR TROPHIES

SEEING

TRIPLE TAIL
April 2021
USM GULF COAST RESEARCH LAB
TRIPLE TAIL TAG & RELEASE PROGRAM
28-872-1202



By Bobby Cleveland

RED

ED ELLINGTON'S ORANGE CORK HAD BARELY SETTLED IN THE WATER,

just off the bank at the end of a 15-yard cast, when it shot under the water like a brick was tied to the end of the line.

Ellington was in the process of sitting down on a cooler lid and wasn't alerted. "Ed! Ed! Ed! You got one," Capt. Sonny Schindler said. "Reel tight, right now." Ellington, a retired federal judge from Jackson, did as instructed, and quickly, his 6½-foot spinning rod was bowed in a nice arc. From a sitting position, he began getting line back on the spool.

"Doesn't feel too big," he said, "but he's pulling like he thinks he's a whale." I grabbed the net and stood along the starboard gunwale, waiting to slide the webbing under the fish. As the fish raced past the side of the boat, it appeared to be a sheepshead at first glance.

"Naw, that's a nice puppy drum," Schindler said. "About the sweetest-tasting fish swimming around here." The second pass put the fish within easy reach. Into the net it went on its way to an ice bath in the fish box.

Now, here's the best part of the preceding scene: it took longer to read than it did for Schindler to get us to that spot along the bank, a nondescript stretch on the north side of Bayou Portage, a tributary on the east side of the Bay of St. Louis. It was less than 100 yards from Sunset Landing off Henderson Avenue in Pass Christian, where the captain had met the three of us. Schindler had launched near his home in Bay St. Louis, just a few minutes across the bay.

Less than 5 hours and maybe a half-mile farther down Bayou Portage, we finished our fishing trip. We had a limit of slot redfish, a pile of puppy drum and a sheepshead. Schindler also tagged and released a couple of dozen "rats" — redfish that are shorter than the size minimum: 18 inches Mississippi, 16 inches in Louisiana.

Ellington produced the fish of the day, a 22-inch red with 164 spots — 84 on one side and 80 on the other.

A trophy catch is what it was.



Bayou Portage produced this nice slot redfish that might have as many spots as your average African zebra.

“One of the best things about using Bay St. Louis or Pass Christian as a port in the late fall or winter is that in the right conditions, you don’t have to make a run across the Gulf of Mexico to the marsh,” said Schindler, who operates the 8-boat Shore Thing Charters fishing group. “That can be a blessing when it’s cool or when it’s a bit windy or choppy. It also means you spend 98% of the day fishing, with very little running.”

Very little? How about next to none.

Schindler idled along on his big outboard engine long enough to conduct the morning prayer and go over the safety features of his boat. Then, he switched to the electric trolling motor up front and eased us into casting distance of the bank.

“Obviously, it isn’t always this easy or productive,” he said. “The key is a super-high or high tide that peaks in the middle of the morning. That pushes the fish up out of the middle of the bay to the banks to feed. The high water pushes the baitfish to the shoreline and allows us to get close enough to cast.

“This starts getting good in mid-fall and will last through the winter. We just watch the tide charts and when we have (clients) who just want to get some fish to eat or have kids who just need action, this is what we do.”

It’s just as obvious that some other fishermen seek a bigger tug on the line. That’s when the longer run from the shore to the Biloxi Marsh south of Waveland is required.

In the Biloxi Marsh, it’s often difficult to find keeper reds, but not for the same reason one runs into in the bay. In the marsh, you are just as likely to tie into bull reds — big mature reds over the 30-inch maximum for keeping.

“If you want to feel the power, then there’s nothing like redfish in the marsh in December — well, anytime in the fall or winter,” Schindler said. “You can often find schools of 50 or hundreds of them cruising the shoreline on the outer banks, or even in the bayous in the marsh.”

Tides play a big role in fishing success in the marsh, but quite often, captains have to watch the wind. Strong north winds can blow the water out of the

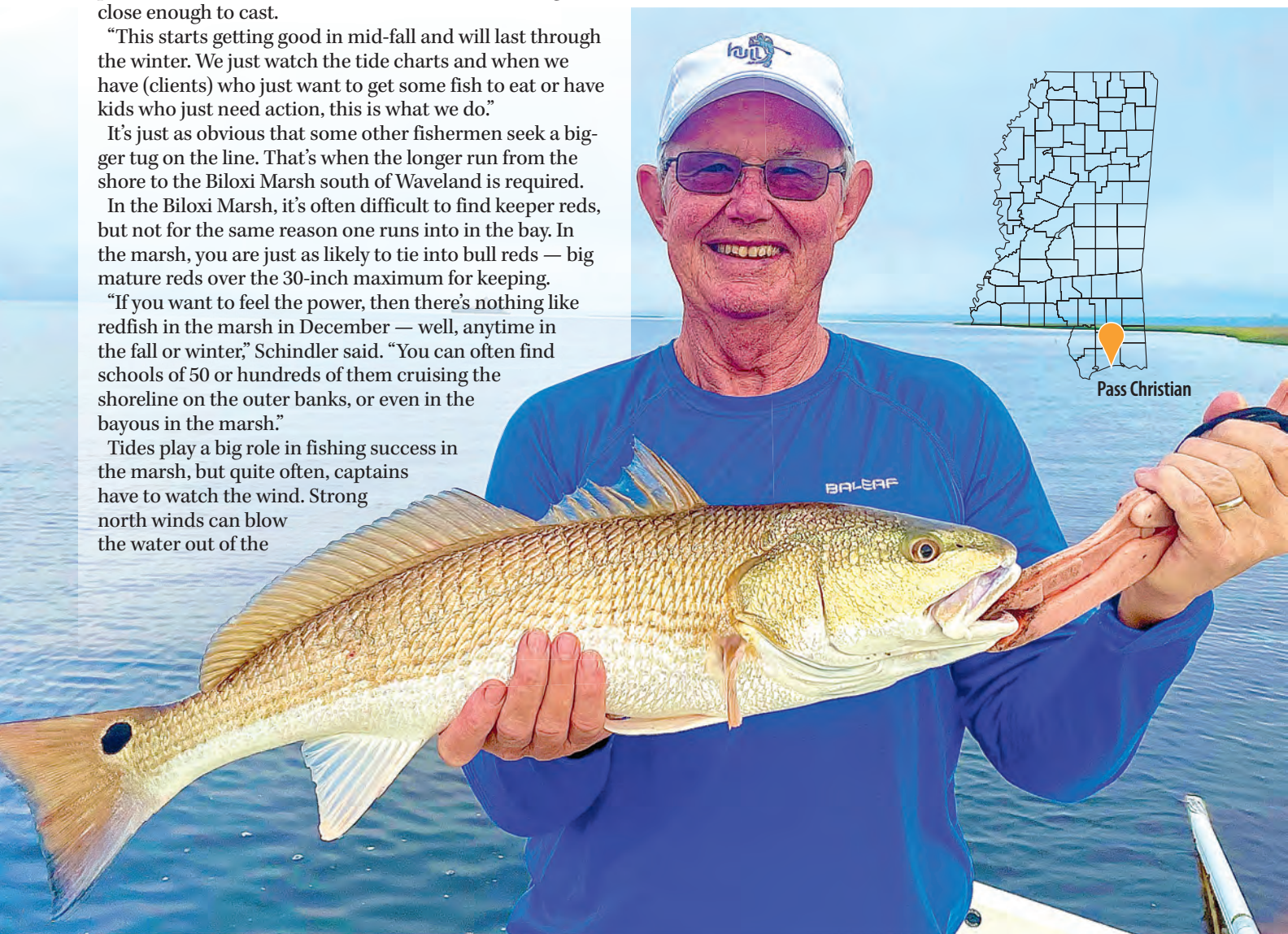
marsh and make it difficult to fish the many ponds and drains. And in the winter, passing weather fronts can make the passage from the mainland to the marsh too uncomfortable, too risky and downright impossible to run.

“That’s another reason why we rely on the inshore fishing in the bay or on the Highway 90 bridge pilings, especially later in the winter when the sheepshead start stacking on the pilings,” Schindler said, pointing over his left shoulder back toward the south. “That’s the Highway 90 bridge right there, maybe a mile from here (Bayou Portage).”

Having the marsh and the bay available is a blessing for the nearshore charter industry and for recreational fishermen in their own boats. While some days may be lost to weather, it’s rarely impossible not to be able to do one or the other.

“Of course, none of that matters if the fish aren’t cooperating, and we’ve been fortunate the past few years,” Schindler said. “We’ve had good fishing in the bay and in the marsh.”

Either way, Schindler recommends never leaving port without either live or dead shrimp and perhaps some cocahoe min-



Inshore waters around Pass Christian and Bay St. Louis are full of drum inside Mississippi's 18- to 30-inch slot limit. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Drifting almost any kind of bait, live or dead, under a cork is liable to get you hooked up with a nice red or puppy drum in Bay St. Louis.



nows. Spinnerbaits, soft plastics and other lures are more fun and easier to cast, but Schindler said the real thing is always more dependable for putting fish in the box.

“For redfish and puppy drum, if you noticed today, we caught just as many, if not more, on frozen bait shrimp than on live shrimp or minnows, and you didn’t get a single fish on a lure,” he said. “It’s the same thing when we fish the pilings.”

In the Biloxi Marsh, especially when the big schools of reds are spotted, that’s when it’s time to pick up and chunk the spinnerbaits, grubs and other lures.

“They’re on missions, looking for food,” Schindler said. “Put something — and I mean just about anything — in front of their big, red heads, and they will move on it and take it.”

Five years earlier, Schindler had taken pro bass fisherman Pete Ponds of Gluckstadt and another fishermen to the marsh. The catch that day was between 50 and 60 redfish, but it took all day to catch a limit of keeper, slot-sized fish. Most all of the fish caught were oversized.

“And if you remember, none of those fish came on live bait,” he said. “We caught them on everything from topwaters to spinnerbaits, crankbaits to grubs. We started out in insulated jump suits and finished in short-sleeve T-shirts. We had a decent, but not great, tide range that day, and we caught fish on the rise, the peak and then on the fall.

“You need tidal movement no matter where you fish in the Gulf or connected waters, but those super-high and high tides, man they are perfect for fishing inshore and maximizing the time spent casting and catching.” ■

For information on Shore Thing Charters, visit shorethingcharters.com

TAGGING REDFISH ➤



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.

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TAGGING REDFISH: MORE THAN JUST A HOBBY

If you fish often enough the inshore and nearshore waters of the Gulf of Mexico near Pass Christian and Bay St. Louis, chances are pretty good that you'll eventually reel in a redfish sporting a small tag — compliments of Capt. Sonny Schindler.

"I can't tell you how many I've tagged over the past few years, but I can promise you it numbers in the thousands," said Schindler, of Shore Thing Charters. "I've got tagged redfish swimming all over the Gulf, and all of them have been tagged either in the Bay, in the Biloxi Marsh or along the shoreline of the Gulf. I also tag tripletails.

"They're swimming in Mississippi and Louisiana and beyond. I've had several redfish recaptures from Louisiana waters up in Lake Ponchartrain and over to Perdido on the Alabama-Florida border. My longest recapture was a tripletail I released off Cat Island that

was caught in Matagorda Bay in Texas."

Schindler claims a 5% to 10% recapture rate on redfish.

On a recent trip in the Bay, Schindler tagged and released more than 20 rat reds caught by his anglers. One of the other Shore Thing captains was fishing about a half-mile away.

"Hey Capt. Sonny," came the call on the radio. "We just recaptured one of your tagged fish."

That was music to Schindler's ears, and he broke out in a big grin. "Record the number, the length and the coordinates, and get that info to me," he said. "I'll look him up and see when and where he was tagged and get the information to the fishermen."

Schindler doesn't tag fish just for fun; he shares info with the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast Research Laboratory.

"Those guys do great work and have many research programs





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Sport Fish Tag Recapture Report for: RD 2573

18-Oct-21 - The following information pertains to a Red Drum that was tagged, released and later recaptured. We thank you for your participation in this important research and wish you the best in your fishing endeavors.

Tag book assigned to: Capt. Sonny Schindler
Tag Angler: Rick Cleveland **Tag Date:** 10/4/2021
Recapture Angler: Roger Burnell **Recapture Date:** 10/18/2021
Tag Location: 30 20.868, - 89 16.681
Recapture Location: 30 20.812, - 89 16.645
Length at tagging (inches): **Length at recapture (inches):**
Fork Total 15 **Fork Total 15.75**
Days Out: 14 **Rereleased?** Y **Distance (miles):** 0.1

Comments: With Matt Tusa, Shore Thing Charters



going, and tagging and tracking redfish and tripletails are just two of them," he said. "But yeah, I also do it for me, because I have a stake in this fishery. It's my life, my livelihood and one of my passions. Whatever I can do to assist in fishery management and fish production, I'm all up in that. I've had a fish recaptured 500 days after we tagged it; most are quicker."

Within two weeks of one trip, Schindler emailed one angler a recapture report of a 15-inch red he had caught that the captain tagged that morning in the bay. Two weeks later, an angler named Roger Burnell recaptured it about 200 yards away; the fish was 15¾ inches long, meaning it had grown ¾ of an inch.

That quick recapture is interesting, but isn't even close to Schindler's record.

"No, my record came about three weeks after (that)," Schindler said. "We captured a red at Cat Island one morning and got all excited when we saw the tag hanging from it. I grabbed it, noticed it didn't have a lot of slime or dirt or anything else on it, so I knew it hadn't been long in the water.

"When I read the number, I recognized it. I had tagged that 12-inch red 10 minutes earlier and caught it about 10 feet away from where we caught it the first time."

Now, that was one hungry redfish. ■

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Many people consider the time between the “fall feed-up” — when crappie gorge themselves to prepare for winter — and the spring spawning season a poor time to catch crappie. However, even on the coldest days, action can be hot in the right spots.

“It never gets too cold to fish for crappie in Mississippi,” said Brad Taylor, a professional crappie angler and guide from Greenville. “The winter months are some of the best months to crappie fish in Mississippi — as good or better than the spring. In the winter, people normally don’t catch the size crappie they can catch during the spring spawning season, but they generally catch better numbers.”

As the weather cools, recreational boaters, jet skiers and even many fishermen disappear from state waters. In addition, hunting seasons pull thousands of Mississippi sportsmen away from fishing. This leaves crappie to a hardy handful of intrepid souls.

“December and January are great times to catch crappie,” said Terry Stewart, a professional crappie angler and guide from Quentin. “The secret to catching crappie in the winter is finding them and slowing down the presentation. In the winter, I downsize my baits to smaller

minnows and jigs. Often, crappie will hit a jig better than a minnow.”

To find scattered crappie, many anglers turn to old reliable tactics like spider-rigging and long-line trolling. In the past few years, however, many crappie anglers have started pulling planer boards. Essentially brightly colored, floating plastic blocks designed to run either to the left or right when pulled behind a boat, planer boards allow anglers to search significantly more water in less time.

For a typical planer-board rig, run two lines without boards directly behind the boat. Also, deploy two to four off each side, each rigged so the boards run at varied distances from the boat. Push the boat forward slowly with the trolling motor. Under the boards, anglers can dangle almost anything that might tempt a crappie. Try several lures of different sizes, configurations, colors and types worked at varied depths to determine patterns.

■ By John N. Felsher

CATCH COLD CRAPPIE

MISSISSIPPI LAKES ARE MOSTLY EMPTY OF FISHERMEN COME WINTER, BUT THEY'RE STILL FULL OF SLABS. HERE'S HOW A HANDFUL OF PROS FILL THEIR COOLERS WHEN THE WEATHER'S COLD.





ELECTRONIC ADVANTAGE

More recently, many anglers have put away multi-pole rigs in favor of using single spinning rods to cast at individual fish they locate with high-tech electronics like Garmin's LiveScope that provide such incredibly detailed images that anglers can identify fish species or even watch them swish their tails, all from sound waves. With the transducer mounted on the trolling motor, the sound waves go in whatever direction the motor points.

"When using LiveScope, when we see a big fish on the screen, we pitch a jig to it," said Stewart (601-502-5699). "If we can put it right on the fish's nose, it'll bite."

With the technology, anglers can scan a brush pile and pick out the individual fish they want to catch, casting specifi-

Running lures behind side planers allows anglers to cover a wider swath of water when searching for concentrations of crappie.

cally to that fish. Tracking the bait on the screen, anglers can maneuver it close to a particular fish. Sometimes, they can watch a large crappie gingerly taste a bait. An angler relying solely upon the sensitivity of the rod and line might never know a strike occurred.

"LiveScoping has changed the way we fish," said Brandon Fulgham from Grenada, who guides on the "Big Four" lakes — Sardis, Arkabutla, Enid and Grenada, plus Ross Barnett Reservoir near Jackson. "Now we just put the LiveScope in, drop a jig or a minnow in front of a fish's mouth and watch it eat it. In the winter, crappie are much more likely to hit live bait than plastic jigs."

DEEP IS RELATIVE ➤

DEEP IS RELATIVE

When temperatures turn cold, most people naturally think crappie head deep. That's true to some extent, but in many Mississippi lakes, crappie won't find terribly deep water. Sardis holds some of the deepest water in the Magnolia State, plunging to 70 feet in places.

"Everybody thinks that they should look for crappie in deep water during the winter, but I've never caught crappie deep at that time of year," said Fulgham (662-417-9117). "I've always caught them up shallow, even in really deep lakes. On Grenada, Enid and Sardis, I hardly ever fish structure. Those big, white crappie in Grenada are often out in 20 feet of water suspended 6 feet down around nothing. They are just chasing shad."

Starting in the fall, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers draws down the four flood-control lakes in northern Mississippi. By winter, only the deepest channels and pools remain. The annual drawdown concentrates fish and makes them easier to catch in the winter — if anglers can launch their boats.

"We can have some really good fishing in December and January in Enid and Sardis," Fulgham said. "Most often, the

water is really muddy in the winter. Many people get discouraged by muddy water, but crappie in those lakes live in muddy water all year-long, so they are used to it. Muddy water puts fish high in the water column. They suspend about 2 to 4 feet deep out over deeper water."

To find big crappie in the winter, look for the bait with electronics or visually. Lower water levels also concentrate shad. Crappie won't stray far from their groceries, particularly in the winter. When people find shad, they start spider-rigging.

"If someone didn't have LiveScope, I recommend spider-rigging with double-minnow rigs," Fulgham said. "When the water is muddy and cold, we spider-rig with eight poles out and use double-minnow rigs. I put a hook at the top. Then, I drop down about 24 to 30 inches and add a ½-ounce egg sinker weight. Below the weight, I'd put another hook. We drop the minnow rigs down to about 2 to 5 feet deep to find the suspended fish."

When the lakes become too shallow to launch large boats, many people hit the river tailraces below the dams with small boats. With single-pole rigs, they fish the shoreline drop-offs, rocks, stumps, river-bend holes and similar places. Drop a single jig or a jig tipped with a minnow next to structure.

DON'T MOVE THAT JIG

Don't add much extra movement. In cold water, lethargic fish usually want something extremely subtle, but use brighter colors. Many people use small hair jigs because they give off the most subtle action. With the slightest



Brightly colored jigs are favorite in the winter, when dirty or muddy water might be the norm on some Mississippi reservoirs. Tipping a jig with a live minnow doubles your chances of drawing a strike. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Big, winter crappie are often found suspended over deeper water, associating with no cover or structure, just baitfish.



water movements, the hairs on a jig quiver just enough to attract a crappie's attention. "Underwater, the hair kind of moves," Stewart said. "Some people use feathers or various types of hair that move a little differently. Small jigs seem to do best in the winter. In really clear water, drop the jig slowly or it'll spook fish. If the water is muddy, get it down quickly by using a slightly bigger jig and a color they can more easily see. When fishing muddy water, orange and chartreuse is one of my favorite color combinations. Gray is always good as well as silver. My favorite hair jigs are Crappie G Custom Hair Jigs out of Louisiana."

Approach any cover as quietly as possible. Some anglers use poles 14 to 20 feet long to reach spots without spooking fish. Drop the bait as close as possible to an object. During the winter, anglers almost need to tickle a crappie's nose to make it bite. Many anglers add a scented pellet to more flavor and enticement to provoke finicky fish in cold water. Whenever possible, fish completely around any object or hit it from multiple anglers to locate fish.

Besides Sardis, Arkabutla, Grenada and Enid, Ross Barnett can also provide great winter action. Much of the lake stays shallow, but the original Pearl River channel and some associated old oxbows inundated by the reservoir hold waters 25 to 40 feet deep. More known for numbers than quality, Ross Barnett can still produce some 3-pound crappie.

ROSS BARNETT'S ALLURE >



John N. Felsher is a professional freelance writer and photographer with more than 1,700 articles in more than 117 magazines to his credit. He worked as the outdoors editor for several Louisiana newspapers and currently co-hosts a weekly outdoors radio show on WNSP 105.5 FM in Mobile, Ala. You can contact him at JohnNFelsher.com.



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

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

The gun is only $43\frac{3}{4}$ inches long. It comes with a turkish walnut stock featuring a pistol grip. The trigger is selectable for barrels.

MSRP: \$809

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



GETTIN' FRESH

Hal Schramm

Backwater habitats provide shelter from water flows in riverine reservoirs.



Photo courtesy Tim Gampolli

LIFE IN DYNAMIC HABITATS

RESERVOIR WATER FLOW AFFECTS GROWTH OF LARGEMOUTHS, SPOTS

Compared to natural lakes with relatively stable water levels, reservoirs are dynamic habitats where fluctuations in level and flow are typical conditions.

While many anglers can easily envision the large fluctuations in reservoir elevation that happen every year, such as occurs in Mississippi's flood-control reservoirs. Equally obvious are the fluctuations in elevation over wet and dry years that occurs in water-supply reservoirs such as those in the Southwest. Less obvious are annual variations in water flow that occur in riverine reservoirs, such as those of the Tenn-Tom Waterway or Tennessee River reservoirs. A recent study by Dr. Michael Eggleton and graduate research assistant Clint Peacock at University of Arkansas-Pine Bluff document how variation in flow can affect largemouth and spotted bass growth.

THE STUDY

Largemouth and spotted bass were collected from the lower 300 miles of the

Arkansas River. This reach of the river became a series of 11 navigation pools with the completion of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System in 1970. The pools of these "run-of-the-river" reservoirs are primarily main-channel habitat — among the 11 pools, 58% to 82% of the surface area of these pools is in the main channel.

Annual growth increments were calculated for each species and tested for association with April-to-September water flows. That time span corresponds roughly with the growing season for bass. Water flow, the volume of water moving through the reservoirs was classified as "low" when flows were in the lower 25% of the flows measured since 1970, "high" if the flows were in the upper 75% of flows measured since 1970, and "average" if the flows were greater than low and less than high — the middle 50% of flows measured since 1970.

GROWTH AFFECTED

The flows affected the growth of dif-

ferent size groups of bass differently. Growth of largemouth bass during their first and second years was greater during low- and average-flow years. Growth during the fourth and fifth years was greatest during the high-flow years. High flows enhanced the growth of larger largemouth but deterred the growth of smaller largemouth.

Like largemouths, spotted bass had greater growth during their first and second years when flows were low or average. Unlike largemouths, their growth during the next three seasons was not different among flow categories. Growth of young spotted bass was enhanced by low and average flows, but flow didn't affect the growth of adult spots.



Hal Schramm is an avid angler and veteran fisheries biologist.

The consequences of the impaired growth of young bass during high-flow years can be consequential for the fishery. During periods of low and average flow, largemouth bass attained the 15-inch minimum length limit in approximately 4.6 years. In periods predominated by high flows, they grew to 15 inches in 5.1 years; it took six months longer for fish to recruit to the fishery. Similarly, it took spotted bass almost a full year longer to grow to 12 inches, the minimum legal length limit.

MORTALITY CONCERNS

Mortality is always occurring, always removing fish from the population. In the years of faster growth, the largemouth bass larger than 15 inches were 17% of the population. In the years of slower growth, largemouth bass larger than 15 inches were 7% of the population, a 60% reduction in legal-length fish. The same reduction in proportion of fish larger than the minimum legal length limit applies to spotted bass. Higher flows, slower growth, fewer fish recruited to the fishery.

The researchers proposed that the slowed growth during high-flow years may create a “growth deficit,” whereby smaller fish, even if growing at a normal rate as larger adults, may never make up for the smaller size achieved during their first several years. The consequence is that it will take longer for the bass to reach 4, 5 or 6 pounds.

Various environmental factors could cause the reduction in growth during periods of high flow, but the lack of backwaters in this reservoir system is likely a significant factor, because bass are confined to the main channel where they are exposed to the high flows. Due to sedimentation, the backwater areas that remain are steadily being reduced in area and habitat quality. This is exactly the same condition that is occurring in the



Photo courtesy Roger Stegall

Tenn-Tom Waterway where, as of 2003 when the system was only 20 years old: 40% of the total aquatic habitat downstream of Bay Springs Lake was main-channel habitat, and some of the pools had lost 8% to 10% percent of backwater habitat. The losses of area of healthy backwater habitat since 2003 have not been assessed but undoubtedly are far greater. ■

LUNKER LINES

Paul Elias

Paul Elias said bass will be shallow on Enid Lake in December as long as the water temperature remains at 40 degrees or above.



FISH ENID IN DECEMBER

BASS WILL BE SHALLOW EARLY IN THE MONTH, HEAD TO DEEP WATER LATER ON

Today, Enid Lake reigns as one of Mississippi's best bass-fishing lakes, due to the numbers and sizes of bass being caught there: plenty of 3- to 5-pounders. Lakes go through cycles with down years, and then, at other times, large amounts of nice bass are caught.

I like Enid because the lake seems to be on the upside of this cycle. When you're fishing in December, Enid will be 15 to 20 feet low for its winter drawdown. Bass will be more concentrated in fewer places, and these three lures should pay off best.

CRANKBAITS

I'll fish a chartreuse shad Mann's C4 crankbait on a cranking action 7-foot FX Custom rod with a Bruin 6.2:1 reel and 14-pound White Fluorocarbon line. I'll fish a C4 as far back in Enid's pockets and creeks as possible, starting at their

mouths. I'll search for cover or structure where bass will hold, including stumps, logs, rocks and boulders.

Although anglers consider sight-fishing and wearing sunglasses a spring tactic, in December, I'll wear my Wiley X sunglasses to see shallow, underwater cover when the water is clear. In muddy water, I'll use my Lowrance electronics to find shallow cover. In late December, bass will be pulling out of shallow water and concentrating on main-river points: their ends, the edges of their dropoffs and ditches off the edges.

The weather fronts coming through in December will tell you more about where to search for bass. Warm fronts mean bass will be shallow on the points. With a cold front, bass are on the edges of the points, the first dropoffs away from the points and the points' ends. Once warm fronts come through, I'll fish topwater lures like the Zara Spook.

WALKING BAITS

I like lures like Spooks and Whopper Ploppers when fishing Enid's shallows in December. These lures are most often fished in the spring and summer, early and late, but in the first two weeks of December, I'll fish them from 1 to 15 feet deep, with 15-pound braid and a 6- to 8-inch monofilament leader. I'll be using an 8:1 Bruin reel on a 6-foot-9, medium-action FX Custom rod.

I'll retrieve a walking-type lure at a medium speed. I may stop the retrieve for a second or two, and then walk the



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.

Although walking baits like a Zara Spook are considered spring baits, Paul Elias likes to fish them in December on Enid Lake.



bait again. If the water's warming, bass may want a faster retrieve; if it's cooling, they may prefer a slower retrieve. Try several types of retrieves and let the bass tell you how fast or how long to let the lure sit.

You won't get many bites in December, but the bass that attack these topwater baits are usually larger fish than you'll catch on other baits. Once the water starts cooling, bigger bass want to eat gizzard shad and bluegills and prefer bigger baits. The surface water temperature at Enid doesn't get below 40 degrees until January, so when the air temperature's in that 40-degree range, the big bass will attack topwater lures.

JERKBAITS

I like a 5-inch suspending jerkbait in the Table Rock color: purple back/chartreuse sides/orange belly. I'll be fishing with a 6-foot-6, medium-action FX Custom rod and 10-pound White Peacock fluorocarbon on an 8:1 Bruin reel. I'll fish a jerkbait on main-lake points and steep banks for suspended bass, cranking the jerkbait down to the water depth where I want it to suspend. I'll jerk it two or three times and then allow it to sit still for a 1-to-5 count.

The bass will tell me how to fish the jerkbait. If they're biting it when it's sitting still, you'll know how long to let the bait sit still before jerking it again. If the bass take the bait when you're jerking it, they're telling you they want to bite a moving bait. As the weather cools at the end of December, jerkbaits may become your most-dependable lures.

SOLUNAR TABLES

I depend on Solunar Tables in the winter. I don't fish all day in cold weather, but instead, target my fishing according to the best feeding times indicated by the Solunar Tables.

I usually like to fish from 2 hours before the peak feeding times to 2 hours after, according to the tables.

When fishing Enid in December, I feel that catching eight to 10 keeper-sized bass in that 3- to 5-pound range just before, during and just after the peak feeding times recommended by the Solunar Tables is a great day of fishing. ■

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LURE REVIEW

Don Shoopman

Guide Charlie King caught this bass, which weighed almost 11 pounds, at Toledo Bend on his go-to soft plastic bait the past 10 to 12 years, a Zoom Trick Worm.



A TRICKY, TRICKY WORM

ZOOM'S TRICK WORM STILL GOING STRONG, CATCHING BASS AFTER BASS

In late October, an out-of-state bass angler visiting Keith's Toledo Bend Tackle near Hemphill, Texas, asked the owner if there was a new artificial lure worth a try before fishing a bass club tournament at nearby Lake Sam Rayburn.

Keith Nabours thought about it a few minutes, then said he tells customers who really want to catch bass to fish an oldie but goldie — a Zoom Trick Worm in redbug color. Hundreds and hundreds of anglers have been sold on the soft-plastic worm over the years, hooked on it, you might say, just like the bass they target.

Charlie King of Coushatta, a town 45 miles south of Shreveport on US 71, knows first-hand what Nabours was talking about. He has been catching bass consistently on a redbug Trick Worm.

King, who runs Charlie King Professional Fishing, started guiding part-time in 1991 and went full-time after he retired as a registered nurse in 2014. He has fished FLW and BASS tournaments circuits off and on for 30 years, and he's been relying on redbug Trick Worms since 2008.

Zoom Bait Co. introduced the Trick Worm in 1981. It was the first straight-tail, high-floating, super-soft plastic worm for fishing shallow water.

Why is it so effective?

King, 69, laughed and said, "Ha ha. Lord, I don't know. It doesn't resemble anything. It's a straight-tail worm with a skinny profile."

A PRO TALKED IT UP

King said he got a heads up on it about 15 years ago when he was fishing the same bass tournaments as pro Harold

Allen from Shelbyville, Texas. Allen was doing well — "On a roll," King said — and he'd talk about the reason behind his success on stage: fishing a Trick Worm.

"Nobody ever picked up on it," King said. "One day, about 10, 12 years ago, I was struggling. I said, 'Hell, I might need to try one.' I picked one up and started throwing it, and it's worked for me ever since. It was all because Harold Allen talked about it years ago.

"That bait's been a killer for me in eastern Texas and northwest Louisiana. I throw it 90% of the time. I go to a Senko most of the time in the spring, but I still throw a redbug Trick Worm."



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.



Zoom Trick Worm

Keeping it locked in his hand has been rewarding in more ways than monetary.

"I've caught a lot of big fish on that," he said.

The biggest? He caught a hawg that weighed almost 11 pounds in August 2013 at Toledo Bend and another 8.49-pound fish in June 2017 at Lake Bistineau.

QUALITY AND QUANTITY

During the Bob Sealy Big Bass Splash in October on Lake Sam Rayburn, King's redbug Trick Worm accounted for 61 bass, the biggest being 2.81 pounds.

"I fished them until I ran out of a couple bags," he said.

Of course, it's a staple whenever he has a guide trip. King has found different ways to catch bass on it: Texas-rigged, Carolina-rigged, wacky rigged, punching grass and even probing deep or shallow brush at Lake Sam Rayburn and Toledo Bend.

"It gets through brush easier and faster," he said.

Much of the time, King fishes a Trick Worm Texas-rigged under a ¼-ounce worm weight that he pegs. When he wants to fish it in brush tops, he'll use a ½-ounce worm weight, also pegged in Texas-rigged fashion.

King, has found that a Trick Worm triggers more strikes than a larger, flashier curlytail plastic worm, which sometimes hangs up when the tail wraps around a limb.

"It's more of a finesse worm. It's a real versatile bait. Like I say, it has year-round appeal. It'll fish shallow, it'll fish deep and it'll fish in-between," he said.

Nabours, Allen and King, among many, many others, know what it can do. ■

For more information on the Zoom Trick Worm and other Zoom Bait Co. Inc. products, visit zoombait.com or call 706-548-1008.





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SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

Brian Cope



Barracudas are among the ocean's most-vicious predators; they're found inshore, offshore and everywhere in between. **BELOW:** This 'cuda was caught 50 miles offshore.

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: GREAT BARRACUDA

VICIOUS PREDATOR SWIMS IN MOST OF THE WORLD'S OCEANS, AND IS AT HOME ANYWHERE

The great barracuda, *Sphyræna barracuda*, is a large, missile-shaped predator found throughout the world's oceans. It is a menacing-looking fish, with a mouth full of sharp teeth, and it lives up to its looks when hungry or provoked.

In the United States, it's commonly referred to simply as barracuda, because the great barracuda is the only species of its family that is numerous enough to draw attention from anglers.

It varies widely in its coloration, depending on the water where it's living. Most are blue-gray along the back, fading to silvery white along the bottom of their bodies. They often have a row of dark bars and black blotches along their sides.

Barracudas have two dorsal fins; the second one is usually dark purple to black with a white tip. The anal and caudal fins match the second dorsal. They have powerful jaws, and their teeth look like fangs. Their teeth are so long that they have holes in their mouths opposite the teeth, allowing the fish to close its mouth without biting itself.

These fish are commonly seen and caught by anglers around oil rigs, wrecks and reefs, natural and artificial. Most are caught offshore, but it's not uncommon for anglers to catch them around near-shore structure.

Barracudas have a large swim bladder that allows them to hover close to the surface without moving. This makes them deadly to other fish, which happen

upon them without being alerted to their presence. Once those fish are in range, the barracuda launches into action with a sudden burst of speed, capturing its prey with a quick slash.

OPPORTUNISTIC

A barracuda's diet consist of any living creature in the sea. They are known to attack fish larger than themselves, biting them into chunks. Barracudas aren't very mobile, but they can exceed speeds of 27 mph in short bursts. They hunt solo for the most part, but fisheries biologists have observed several working together to herd schools of prey.

Aside from hunting their own prey, barracudas will often eat the scraps of other predator fish. They are known for hanging around spear fishermen in hopes of stealing their speared fish. On rare occasions, they have bitten spear fishermen while attempting to nab their catch.

Anglers targeting barracuda have the most luck with live bait, but artificial lures retrieved very quickly will also draw strikes from these fish.

Barracuda are rarely misidentified, but they are sometimes mistaken for king mackerel or wahoo. They are often called "cudas." Another nickname is "giant sea pike."

Louisiana's state-record barracuda, caught by A.C. Mills in August 1970, weighed 50 pounds. The Mississippi state record, caught by Matt Glenn, weighed 52 pounds, 6 ounces. He caught the fish

in August 2012.

The world-record barracuda weighed 87 pounds, 3 ounces. Christian Loranger caught it in September 2012 off the coast of Christmas Island, Kiribati.



Brian Cope



Brian Cope of Borden, S.C., is a retired U.S. 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.



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COOKING ON THE WILD SIDE

Jerry Dilsaver

SHRIMP, SAUSAGE TATER TOT BALLS

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

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


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

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

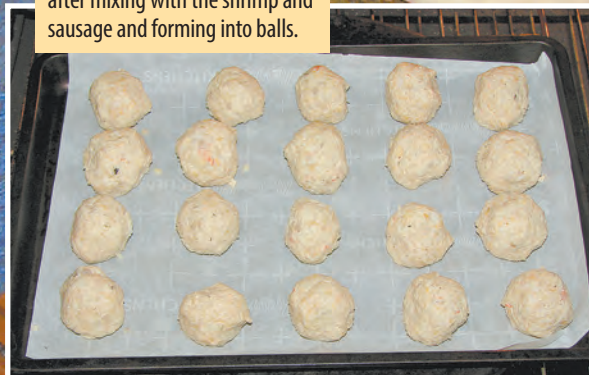
One other thing regular readers will know is that I like foods with a little character and robust flavor. This is a treat that really lends itself well to preparing for everyone to enjoy. It can be made with mild- or medium-flavored sausage; the only other spice added is freshly ground black pepper.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

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

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



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



S.S.T. BALLS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I have made this using cream cheese right from the refrigerator

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

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

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

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

INGREDIENTS:

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

4 cups tater tots

8 oz. cream cheese

1/4 cup sweet onion, finely chopped

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Parchment paper

For dipping sauce:

1/2 cup mayonnaise

Texas Pete Cha Sauce to taste

PREPARATION

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

The author's bass boat after receiving new carpet, seats, a trolling motor with a recessed foot-pedal tray, and electronics. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** The author adds the final touch to his bass-boat restore. A recessed foot pedal tray relieves fatigue.

BEAT WINTER BY RESTORING A BASS BOAT; IT'S A PROJECT

By Nick Vaccaro

For some anglers, bass fishing is a year-round battle of wits and determination. Layers of clothing, paired with face masks and skull caps, enable continued participation. Other anglers love the sport but display limitations. For those, numerous cups of coffee and a boat-restoration project can fill the idle time in a wet and cold winter.

Of course, an angler can restore any boat he or she sees fit, and the process is not exclusive to bass boats. Bass fishers, however, are a different breed, and as a result, they take the restoration process beyond limitations to produce the ultimate bass-busting machine. Following a barrage of steps can yield success.

CHECK THE HULL

When purchasing a boat that's the right candidate for restoration, buyers must exercise caution. In most cases, if you are buying a boat needing work — and not a \$60k newbie — you are more than likely working within the confines of a budget. The budget is often the biggest obstacle.

Most items in the restoration are typically cosmetic, but not the hull. Unless you are a fiberglass guru, avoid damaged hulls or those that look suspect. Giving several knocks with the knuckles around the transom can discover any softness or rot. Brown stains traveling downward from outboard mounting hardware are a tell-tale sign of potential decay. Unless your budget is quite large, steer away from the stains.

Hulls that show severe signs of wear and stress cracking should be avoided; they can be a ticking time bomb that can leave you stranded or sinking. Neither makes for a good day of fishing.

GEL COAT

That sexy sparkle that glistens in the sunlight is gel coat. Buyers should not necessarily run from a light, chalky finish, as long as they understand some time and elbow grease will be warranted in bringing back the luster.



Photos by Nick Vaccaro

Refinishing an oxidized gel coat is a step-by-step process utilizing soapy water, several rags and various courses of sandpaper. When attempting to revitalize the gel coat, be sure to read all manufacturer instructions. A visit to YouTube goes a long way.

CARPET, SEATING ISSUES

You get what you pay for, which has never been truer than when installing carpet in your bass boat. Avoid products that are not meant for this type of use. Just because the carpet at the local building-supply store is specified for outdoor use does not mean it is best suited for a bass boat's flooring and decks.

Restorers will save money down the line by going straight to a marine carpet provider. Spend the money on better products and installation goods. After getting glue stuck to various parts of your body, you will not want to tackle this area of the project ever again.

Seating falls into the same category: a significant investment. Besides the striping and decals, the seats will accentuate that fine

bass boat to be. Locate a marine provider and splurge. After spending time on this project, you will want to enjoy your new ride every weekend. Get the seats that are big and comfortable. Nothing makes a fishing trip more miserable than being uncomfortable and fatigued.

TROLLING MOTOR, ELECTRONICS

After getting the aesthetics out of the way, it is time to drill down on the bass-hunting tools: the trolling motor and depth finders. Splurge for a larger trolling motor that is at least 24 volts to combat windy conditions. Nothing is more frustrating than fighting wind when you should be battling bass.

It is easy to go overboard with electronics here and buy the biggest and best — the ones that look like wide-screen TVs. Remember to stay within your budget. Enhancements are always possible later and only involve a few screws, whereas upgrading carpet involves solvents, scrapers, sweat and cussing. Again, spend more on the carpet.

LAST OF THE ADVICE

Bass fishermen love to spin yarns, tell stories and report how they handled an issue. The internet is an incredible source of forums and groups; ask questions if any doubt surfaces.

Local fishing clubs can undoubtedly help guide you with dos and don'ts. Just remember, when it comes to that winter restoration project, it is always better to ask questions in the present than regret a wrong decision later. ■





BOAT-RAMP ETIQUETTE 101

KNOW THE PROCEDURE, GET IN AND OUT AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE, BE KIND

B By Brian Cope
 Boat-ramp etiquette 101 is a class that's rarely taught but greatly appreciated by most boaters who spend any time on the water serviced by public-access areas.

Boat ramps are the gateway to a fun day on the water, but they can also be the source of unnecessary stress, especially when crowded. And that's even more true when boaters don't use proper boat-ramp etiquette.

Boat-ramp etiquette comes down to being courteous and thoughtful to other boaters looking to launch or retrieve their boats. While this seems obvious to most of us, a single boater who is either unprepared, rude or simply oblivious can back up traffic and spoil the party for everyone else. Don't be that boater.

Next time you launch your boat, keep these tips in mind, and you'll be one cog in the well-oiled machine of a smooth-running boat ramp:

IS BOAT READY?

Have all your prep work completed before you back your boat down the ramp. Some boat landings have designated "Make Ready" lanes that are out of the way of the ramp. If yours doesn't,

find a place that's out of the way of boaters who are backing down or pulling up the boat ramp. Install your boat plug and remove all straps except the trailer's winch strap. Have the key in the ignition and make sure your boat is ready to go as soon as it's backed down the ramp.

Think of everything you need in the boat. This is the time to load it all. Don't wait until you're on the ramp to do this. Remember, once you're on the ramp, your only goal is to get the boat off the trailer, secured to the dock, out of everyone else's way, then drive your truck to a parking spot.

LAUNCH EFFICIENTLY, GET OUT OF THE WAY

Once you're on the ramp, launch your boat as quickly and safely as possible. This is not the time to check air pressure in your trailer tires or put your cooler in the boat. Whether you have a friend with you or you're doing this alone, keep in mind that others are waiting.

Other boaters realize it may take a little longer when you're alone; no one will mind. But if you're sitting on the ramp, checking your spark plugs, adding your lunch box or other

Don't pull your boat up the ramp, then park it where it is an obstacle to other boaters dropping in or pulling out. Get out of the way before getting ready to leave.



Brian Cope

almost-forgotten items into the boat is the wrong move. Back down the ramp, remove the winch strap, secure the boat to the dock, and pull your truck out of the way and park it.

When tying your boat to the dock, make sure it is out of everyone's way. Remember that other boaters need enough room to back their trailer AND to back their boat off the trailer.

BONUS TIP NO. 1

When you're at a remote boat landing with no painted lines for parking spaces, don't pull up the ramp in a straight line and park so you're lined up to back down the ramp when you return. If you do, you're blocking the ramp. Other boaters need that space to back their own boats.

Now that your boat is in the water and your truck is out of the way, you can load any items you may have forgotten before you backed down the ramp.

Be just as mindful when retrieving your boat

Once your day on the water is complete, it's time to retrieve your boat. Keep in mind, once you're on the ramp, your only goal is to fasten your boat to the trailer. Back your trailer down, load the boat, fasten the winch strap and pull your truck out of the

way of the ramp. Only then should you do anything else.

You'd be surprised — or maybe not if you've used some of the same boat ramps I have — to see how often someone will pull their boat out of the water, park at the top of the ramp, then proceed to unload their boat, toss out their unused bait, bag their trash and walk it to the trash can, check their tire pressure, all while parked at the top of the boat ramp preventing anyone else from using it.

BONUS TIP NO. 2

Some folks are just oblivious. Maybe they're new to boating and don't realize they are in everyone else's way. Some of the most-courteous people can seem rude because they just don't understand boat-ramp etiquette.

When you see these things at the boat ramp, stay calm and help educate those who don't realize their behavior is blocking the ramp. Anytime I've heard another boater say something like "Would you mind moving out of the way so we can use the ramp?" It's always been met with a surprised look of realization, followed by "Oh, sorry. My bad," or something similar. ■

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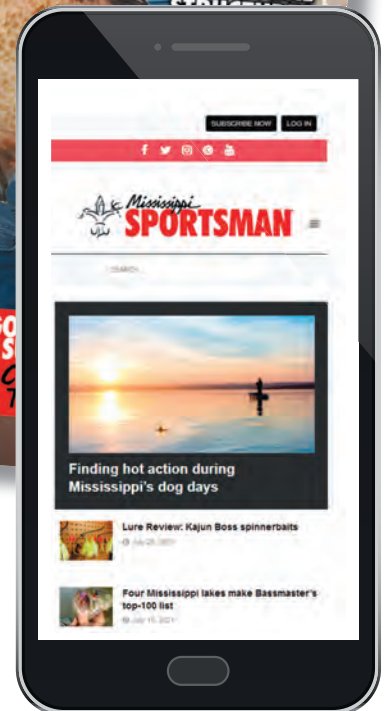
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The "Best Days" column is based on the ever-changing positions of the sun and the moon, rating each day on a scale of 0 to 100. The higher the number, the more solar/lunar influence that day is experiencing (see "Value" column or corresponding black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

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

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

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2021		BEST DAYS			
DEC		POOR	FAIR	GOOD	EXCL. VALUE
Wed	1	█	█	█	34
Thu	2	█	█	█	42
Fri	3	█	█	█	51
Sat	4	█	█	█	54

Sun	5	█	█	█	42
Mon	6	█	█	█	31
Tue	7	█	█	█	21
Wed	8	█	█	█	17
Thu	9	█	█	█	24
Fri	10	█	█	█	36
Sat	11	█	█	█	27

Sun	12	█	█	█	23
Mon	13	█	█	█	25
Tue	14	█	█	█	27
Wed	15	█	█	█	29
Thu	16	█	█	█	50
Fri	17	█	█	█	60
Sat	18	█	█	█	65

Sun	19	█	█	█	56
Mon	20	█	█	█	47
Tue	21	█	█	█	38
Wed	22	█	█	█	33
Thu	23	█	█	█	32
Fri	24	█	█	█	31
Sat	25	█	█	█	34

Sun	26	█	█	█	42
Mon	27	█	█	█	30
Tue	28	█	█	█	23
Wed	29	█	█	█	22
Thu	30	█	█	█	30
Fri	31	█	█	█	39

25 50 75
AVERAGE

For more, visit primetimes2.com

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

ANY LUNAR PERIOD IS ENHANCED WHEN IT OVERLAPS A KEY SOLAR PERIOD. THE BEST OF THESE OVERLAPS ARE DESIGNATED BY THE SUN SYMBOLS: ☀ = DAWN ☀ = HIGH NOON ☀ = DUSK

WHILE THE LESSER MOONRISE AND -SET OVERLAPS (ABOUT 30 MIN. BEFORE AND AFTER THE LISTED TIME) ARE DESIGNATED BY BOLD BLACK TYPE.

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