5 tips for beating the '50-degree mark'

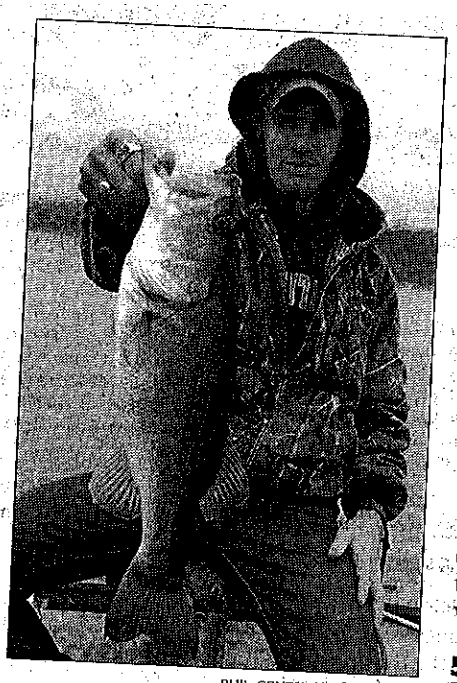
BY PHILLIP GENTRY
THE JOURNAL

Anglers who thought the recent warm spells were going to last got a shock Friday when the latest cold front moved in and winter returned to normal.

Without sounding like the Farmer's Almanac, late January is the typical time when winter starts getting serious about being cold and dreary. For an angler, that means that water temperatures have dropped below the magic 50-degree mark. Many local anglers will give up on fishing until spring arrives, or at least until things start warming up.

The 50-degree mark is more of a transition line than an actual boundary. When water temperatures get below that level, the metabolism of fish really starts to affect how those fish feed and behave. As the surface temperatures on area lakes dip below the 50-degree mark, baitfish such as threadfin shad group en masse in the deeper areas of lakes and will begin dying as temperatures decline.

This doesn't mean you can't catch fish — in fact, many trophy fish are caught between late-January and mid-March because fish have fattened up for the winter and subsequent spring spawn. To catch fish, you just need to change your game plans, and these five tips will help you do that.



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Winter is an excellent time to catch trophy fish, but anglers will need to adjust their tactics to catch them.

1. FISH DEEPER WATER

With the exception of cold-water trout in Lake Jocassee and other deep mountain lakes, fish will tend to hold deeper through the winter than at any other time of the year. Trout are simply wired backward and move shallower, but most likely over deep water. For sunfish species, 30-40 feet depths are typical winter haunts, and many clear-water lake anglers can attest to catching fish at nearly twice those depths.

2. FISH MORE PRECISELY

It's a common cliché to fish slower in the winter, but slower and more precise are not always the same thing. Expect fish to hold closer to the bottom unless you catch them in a rare feeding spree. Fish may also hold tighter to specific structure and will not move far from it when they do feed. Fishing precise means placing your bait in the fish's specific area and keeping there longer since fish tend not to chase food when the water is cold.

3. USE SMALLER BAITS

The main forage for fish of all species when water gets cold is threadfin shad. Threadfin shad are smaller than most other bait, so matching the hatch is key here. It's also easier for fish to ingest and digest smaller baits in the winter when metabolisms are slow.

4. USE LIGHTER LINE

Lighter line has a smaller diameter than heavier lines. Smaller diameter line is of benefit for getting baits deeper in the water column at precise depths. The thicker the diameter line, the more the line will billow as it sinks, giving less direct contact with the bait to feel bites that tend to be extremely subtle when the water is colder.

5. REACTION BITES VS. FEEDING BITES

When fish are dormant and their metabolism is slow, they tend to feed for shorter periods and less often. A fish that is dormant can still be provoked to attack bait if the bait elicits a reaction. Reaction baits are typically small and flashy and are put right in a fish's face. Jigging spoons, drop shot rigs, Alabama and umbrella rigs and darting crankbaits are all examples of reaction-type baits.

Many anglers identify themselves by the species they pursue. It's often difficult to convince a bass angler to fish for trout or a crappie angler to fish for catfish. Keep in mind that some species like crappie and white perch have naturally higher metabolisms and may feed more aggressively than other species. If you just want to get your string stretched, switching species, at least temporarily, may be a good option.

PHILLIP GENTRY is the host of "Upstate Outdoors," a broadcast from noon to 2 p.m. Saturdays on WORD 106.3 FM. This week, the show will be broadcasting live from the Greenville Boat Show at the TD Convention Center on Pleasantburg Drive in Greenville. Contact Gentry at pgentry6@bellsouth.net.