UPSTATE OUTDOORS

Anglers need to follow the food sources to pattern fish during this mild winter



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When Punxsutawney Phil, the famous groundhog weather forecaster, made his prognostication of six more weeks of winter by seeing his shadow, many anglers had trouble begrudging him his prediction.

After all, the winter of 2016-17 has meant regular days in the 60s and 70s along with mild overnight temperatures. Even the big snow event during January was short-lived with only a few inches of snow followed by 72-degree temperatures a week later.

If anglers want to lament the weather, it's because the constant springlike conditions make it hard to pattern fish of all varieties. Predictable winter patterns that usually find fish holding deep and tight to cover have been replaced by patterns ranging anywhere from fish still hanging around their winter haunts to hugging the shoreline as if the spawn was in full swing.

This weekend, professional bass anglers from around the country converge on Lake Cherokee in northeastern Tennessee to kick off the 2017 BASS Elite Tour. Cherokee has been compared to a combination of Hartwell, Keowee and Jocassee in its makeup of clear, often deep water and enough backwater creeks and tributaries to make it interesting. The forecast is typical of the mild winter experienced here in the Upstate. Anglers looking for fish in deep water are likely to be disappointed, while at the same time no consistent pattern for shallow water fishing exists.

"I have a lot of experience on Cherokee," said Brandon Card of Knoxville, Tennessee, an Elite pro angler. "But we've never had a winter this crazy, just in terms of how mild it's been. I think we've just got to expect the unexpected in this one. Fish are going to be so scattered. They'll be all over the place."

When mild winter temps make spring-like conditions for a couple of days followed by colder and often windy conditions the next, anglers can be left scratching their heads. The reason is that fish often stay in a state of transition between deep water areas and shallow flats.

The sunfish family makes up the majority of freshwater fish such as black, bass, crappie and bream, but even more cold water-tolerant species like trout, blue catfish and striped bass may be found anywhere in the water column when Mother Nature become fickle.

Baitfish movements are, like most times of the year, especially important to this transition. Fish will simply follow food sources when survival doesn't top the list.

The caveat is that less-than-normal rainfall conditions and a winter in which algae blooms are nonexistent tend to make water extremely clear. Fish may visit the shallows to bask in warmer water that's heated from sunshine absorbed by dark muddy bottoms, but they can be extremely spooky. The best advice is to make long casts of small bait presentations and take extra precautions not to alert fish to your presence.

Local striped bass guide Mack Farr advised anglers not to overlook extremely shallow water when fishing for winter stripers.

"Don't underestimate how shallow a striper will go in these conditions," said Farr. "We frequently find them laying up on mud flats in water barely deep enough to cover their backs. This makes them nearly invisible to baitfish that push up shallow and then become an easy meal."



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Mild winter weather typically puts fish in shallow water where they can be extremely spooky, but still ready to bite.

Crappie tournament angler Rod Wall of Nintey Six said he has experienced similar situations with crappie, except the fish hold shallow over deep water.

"The sun warms up the very top layer and crappie will just lay around sunning," said Wall. "You never see them on the sonar because they spook when the boat comes over head. The best way to get them to bite is troll a jig or something extremely light way back behind the boat."

Phillip Gentry is the host of "Upstate Outdoors" at noon Saturdays on 106.3 WORD FM. This week's scheduled guest is Larry Ross, speaking about primitive/survival skills. Contact Gentry at pgentry6@bellsouth.net.