OUTDOORS

Bowfishing opportunities right around the corner

If the last time you touched a bow was on Oct. 10, the day before the gun season for white tail deer opened, it's about time you reacquainted yourself with the old stick and string.

A few die hard bowmen may be thinking about sinking an arrow into a strutting gobbler down in the Lowcounty today or in the Upstate come April 1, but many of us fail to take advantage of the multiple bow fishing opportunities right here under our own nose.

Spring is a time when bass, crappie and striped bass throw caution to the wind and invade the shallow en masse to participate in the spring spawn. Just like game fish, so called "trash fish" — the gar, carp and shad — that are the primary targets of many bow fishermen, also hold their own spring dance.

South Carolina rules and regulations pertaining to bow fishing prohibit the taking of any freshwater game fish when bow hunting. Certain non-game species are the quarry of the bow hunting public. In general, three species of fish dominate the creels of bow fishermen – longnose gar, carp and bowfin.

SCDNR biologist Scott Lamprecht provides some insight into the lifestyles of these swimming bowfish targets.

Longnose gar are found in nearly every water body in the state with the exception of the mountain streams. It is the only native gar species to South Carolina with a slight overlap in the Savannah River of spotted gar.

"Spawning gar are often seen in the spring and early summer consisting of one large female on the surface being tended by several smaller males," Lamprecht said. "Longnose gar are a long-lived species, living up to 20 years. Many South Carolina lakes contain a number of large specimens that are simply multiplying because they have few natural predators and are generally not sought out by anglers."



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Bowfishing is a rapidly growing sport that blends the skills of archery, the savvy of fishing and the excitement of hunting into a sport that's found a big following in the state.

The common carp, also a native species, can be distinguished from grass carp — a non-native species stocked by the DNR as a low level vegetation control measure — by both it's size, coloration and dorsal fin.

"Grass carp grow to tremendous size, often growing 16 inches in a year and may weigh over 50 pounds. Common carp are rarely larger than 20 pounds, have a reddish gold coloration, and sport a long dorsal fin that runs down it's back," Lamprecht said. "Grass carp are more cylindrical in shape, have a silver tone, and a short dorsal fin. It is illegal in the state to shoot a grass carp."

The bowfin, more commonly referred to as a mudfish, is native to most South Carolina coastal plain waters and sometimes mistaken for the fish at the top of "America's Most Unwanted" fish list: the snakehead.

"Bowfins do well in still, poor water quality areas with low oxygen," Lamprecht said. "They are carnivorous fish that eat just about any small live creature they can get a hold of – primarily fish, frogs, crustaceans and insects. They spawn in the spring from March until early June, then the male guards the fry until they are old enough to make it on their own."

Bowfin are an ancient, almost prehistoric looking fish whose shape moves from body to tail with little pause. Like most fish, female bowfins grow larger than males. The male can be distinguished by a dark ocellated spot near the tail.

Additional species that are targeted by bow fishermen are gizzards shad, buffalo (a relative of the carp found in more western reaches of the country) and, where legal, catfish.

The majority of successful bowfishing takes place at night when carp, mudfish, and gar come out to feed in the shallows. Still backwaters can be hunted during the day when gar move out into the open to spawn. Early in the year carp and shad will "roll" in the shallows during the spawn.

Recurve or compound bows with reduced draw weights are typical first bows for bowfishing. A reel is attached to the bow and secured to a fiberglass shaft for bowfishing. Steel broadheads will both penetrate and secure fish that are shot.

Aiming is done Robin Hood style by sighting down the arrow. Plenty of practice is required to get the feel of aiming based on light refraction in the water. Most beginners miss high until they get the hang of it.

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