It's time to hit the Hot Hole

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
FOR THE JOURNAL

I look forward to cold weather fishing for two reasons — striper fishing at Lake Hartwell and catching spotted bass on Keowee in the Hot Hole.

Since accessing Hartwell these days means dealing with water levels approaching 15 feet below full pond, it looks like the Keowee spots will get the nod this weekend.

When it comes to bass fishing on Keowee, few can equal Monty McGuffin, host of The Carolina Outdoorsman TV Show. On the days I sleep in on Saturdays, I'll get up and watch McGuffin on WGGS at 9:30 a.m., and starting December 29, the show can be seen on Fox Sports South on Sunday mornings at 10:30 a.m. But for now the guide can give us the rundown on catching Hot Hole spots.

"This is some of the best schooling action you'll find anywhere in the state," McGuffin said. "Lake Keowee's spotted bass follow baitfish into the Hot Hole when cold weather begins to push the bait into the warm water discharge area of the lake."

The current in the Hot Hole is normally pretty swift, and an angler needs to stay on the trolling motor while fishing close to the discharge. McGuffin finds that the aerated water coming out of the discharge area offers baitfish surface cover, as the water is filled with dime-sized bubbles. Spotted bass, normally a bottom-oriented fish, will move into the rushing water and hide among the rocks that line the sides and bottom of the discharge area.

"At times they will be up at the surface chasing bait but usually prefer to hold below the bait waiting for an opportunity to strike," he said.

With baitfish concentrated in the warmer water, spotted bass school early and late in the day and may school longer on cloudy days. Casting bucktails, jigging spoons or other long-distance baits is the best way to target schooling fish. Look for seagulls to give away baitfish locations.

Concentrations of spotted bass may also be found along saddles, drop offs or other bottom relief as far as a half-mile from the Hot Hole due to the wide distribution of warm water that tends to flow in a circular direction between the discharge and the intake. Vertically present a 4-inch drop shot worm or jigging spoon for these fish. Drifting the area with live minnows suspended between 15 feet and the bottom is also productive.

One other aspect about the spotted bass fishery in Keowee is that biologists suggest harvesting some of the fish.

"Take some home to eat," said Dan Rankin, fisheries biologist with the SCDNR. "Catch-and-release is great for the largemouth fishery on Keowee, but releasing spotted bass works against both the largemouth and the spotted bass fishery because of the increased competition for food."

Rankin goes on to explain that angler harvest is necessary in order to bring the spotted bass numbers back to optimum growth and carrying capacity of the lake, as the fish tend to stunt if their numbers go unchecked.

Along with the expanded network viewing of his TV show in the coming year, McGuffin had some additional news concerning an upcoming guest on his show and a unique prize giveaway.

"The 2012 FLW Angler of the Year, Brian Thrift, will team up with yours truly in a January 2013 episode of The Carolina Outdoorsman Show," said McGuffin. "My rod sponsor, Kissel Krafts Custom Fishing Rods, has pledged four of their 'Warrior' series rods as prizes for a unique contest we'll hold during the show."

Interested participants are asked to "Like" The Carolina Outdoorsman Show fan page on Facebook and post a bass fishing question for Thrift. McGuffin explains that the four best questions will be selected and answered during the airing of the show in February, and the submitters will each be awarded a Kissel Kraft Custom Fishing rod. The contest deadline is Jan. 10.

GOT OUTDOOR news or photos to share? Contact Phillip Gentry at pgentry6@bellsouth.net

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As water temperatures in Lake Keowee drop during winter, baitfish and spotted bass will orient themselves to the warm water discharge from the Oconee Nuclear Station.