Jocassee trout immune to the weather

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
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The temperature was below freezing the day fishing guide Steve Pietrykowski of Seneca and I motored across the wide-open lake basin on Lake Jocassee on our way to the tributary creeks that emptied into the lake. The wind chill wasn't bad once his pontoon boat slowed to a little better than idle, but the early morning sun that promised to warm us out on the lake was nowhere to be found at the headwaters of the Thompson River, where steep mountain bluffs blocked out any promise of the sun.

"The wind has been blowing pretty steady into the backs of these rivers with that last front," said Pietrykowski. "The baitfish are already back here, and the weather has packed them into the ends of the creeks. I'm hoping we can catch us a good trout right off the bat."

Lake Jocassee was established as a trophy trout fishery back in the early 1970s, when anglers fished the lake in the spring and then moved elsewhere during the rest of the year to fish. Over time, savvy trout anglers discovered that trolling tactics that were popular up in the northern states using downrigger balls and flutter spoons also worked well on the deep mountain lake.

"Nowadays people believe the only way to catch trout in this lake is by trolling a bunch of hardware, using downriggers and spoons and heavy tackle," said the guide. "That stuff works — I do it all the time — but during the winter when the water temperatures are at their coldest, trout don't have to hold at 100 feet. We can catch them on live bait, using light tackle, anywhere from 20 to 40 feet deep."

True to his word, Pietrykowski broke out several light-action crappie rods outfitted with tiny No. 4 hooks. He opened the lid to his 40-gallon bait tank and scooped out a small blueback herring, hooked it through the nose, and flipped it 25 feet beyond the moored boat, letting the bait sink slowly in the water.

"You cannot catch bait in Jocassee," he said. "You can't even have a cast net in the boat. I was pretty lucky — I got on a bunch of small bluebacks this morning down at Keowee and loaded the tank in three casts."

With clouds of baitfish showing on his sonar graph, it wasn't long before one of the rods bowed over in a deep arch.

"It's a mystery fish," Pietrykowski said as he fought the fish directly under the boat. After a couple of zig-zagged runs, the green coloration of a chunky 3-pound largemouth bass began to develop from the depths.

No sooner had the guide released the largemouth than a rod on the other side of the boat bent over as the lightweight reel screamed in protest. After several minutes of gaining line and losing it while the unseen fish sought the depths to escape its captors, the fish bolted to the surface and made a less-than-spectacular leap from the water.

"You don't see brown trout jump that often," he said. "But if you can get him in, that's definitely the one we are looking for this morning."

The fish finally succumbed to the net and we broke off a few minutes to take some great angler photos utilizing one of the nearby waterfalls as a backdrop before picking up the action right where we left off.

To paraphrase a song, "The weather outside was frightful, but the fishing was more than delightful." That was not a fact lost on Pietrykowski. He had seen it too many times before.

"Jocassee fish are just wired different I guess," he said. "It seems like the worse the weather is, the better the fish up here like it."

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Capt. Steve Pietrykowski of Fishki Business in Seneca claims that the colder and nastier the weather gets on Lake Jocassee, the more the fish like it.