Keowee angler claims stellar week

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF BILL RICKETSON

Keowee anglers Bill Ricketson, left, and Brad Turney have had a great week of fishing after Ricketson discovered a concentration of large bass holding in deep water near the lower end of the lake.

An e-mail came in this week from Keowee angler Bill Ricketson of Salem. While the rest of us have been out trying to harvest a deer with stick and string, he's been stringing plenty of hefty largemouth and spotted bass.

Ricketson lives on Lake Keowee and claims a chance discovery has led to his personal best week of fishing ever.

"Over the last week, I have caught over 40 bass, spots mostly, but with an occasional largemouth mixed in," he said. "All the fish are 60 to 80 feet down as you can see from my sonar picture, and every fish is big as you can tell from the other pictures."

A follow-up phone call to Ricketson provided the rest of the story. The angler, who moved to the area almost a year ago from points north, regularly fishes Keowee from his 16-foot Crestliner boat. Prior to moving south, he caught most of his fish from freshwater by trolling spoons behind downriggers or trolling other baits behind the boat.

This is what led him to last week's discovery.

"I had been trolling a roostertail along the edge of the riprap on the lower end of the lake without much success," Ricketson said. "I pulled off the shoreline and as I was over the open water I noticed my depthfinder suddenly lit up with fish."

Ricketson explained that the high definition sonar unit was marking numerous bass and baitfish along the edge of the old river channel. The fish were in water depths approaching 100 feet. Knowing he couldn't troll that deep without help, the angler returned home and retrieved his downrigger equipment.

With the downrigger installed, Ricketson began pulling silver trolling spoons through the accumulations of fish.

"It didn't take long. My buddy Brad Turney from Nashville and I were into the fish," he said. "Every one that came up was spitting up blueback herring, so we determined the bass were down deep feeding on herring."

Catching numerous spotted bass on Keowee isn't that unusual, as these fish tend to school together while feeding on baitfish. Anyone who is more than just a casual angler and who has plied the waters of Lake Keowee is well aware that this is the unofficial home of the spotted bass.

Spotted bass were illegally introduced into Keowee back in the early 1980's and enjoyed considerable growth well into the end of the 1990's.

It soon became obvious that spotted bass were not only reducing the largemouth numbers, but they had far-reaching effects on other fish species as well as themselves.

Dan Rankin of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources explained what was happening.

"Spotted bass reproduce faster and out-compete other sunfish species," he said. "They eventually became so widespread in Keowee that their own growth rates were beginning to stunt. Black bass anglers do a great job in practicing catch-and-release of bass, but in this case, releasing them wasn't helping keep them in check."

What made Ricketson's discovery last week somewhat remarkable was the size fish he was catching.

"Our fish weren't stunted," he said. "All of them were in the 3-to-4 pound range and bigger, plus we had a fair number of largemouth and one huge crappie mixed in."

Ricketson said he planned to enjoy the phenomenal fish while he could. Both spotted bass and blueback herring are famous for their nomadic ways, so he fully expects the fish to wander off soon to other parts of the lake. But that leaves the angler feeling recharged.

"Now I know what's in this lake, I'll be on the lookout to find them again," he said.

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