

# Seeing spots all around Upstate lakes

BY PHILLIP GENTRY  
FOR THE JOURNAL

It seems like everywhere I turn these days, I'm seeing spots. The doctor has ruled out anything viral because I recently completed a full course of antibiotics and they're still everywhere.

On a recent trip down to Lake Russell a couple of weeks ago with the intention of catching some early spring crappie, fishing guide Wendell Wilson (706-283-3336) and I caught a ton of spots. By "spots" of course I'm referring to spotted bass.

The spotted bass is a member of the black bass family and looks very similar to a largemouth bass/smallmouth bass hybrid. Spotted bass are not native to South Carolina, but they're here en masse, nonetheless.

No special venture project by the DNR, spots were brought in by the bucketful, literally. The term "bucket stocking" is used by fisheries biologists to describe illegal transportation of non-native fish species from one body to another.

Nobody is pointing fingers, but spots are thought to have been introduced into Lake Keowee by anglers from Georgia, where spotted bass thrive and grow to more than respectable sizes in Lake Sydney Lanier.

Because spotted bass tend to be a more prolific breeding fish as well as an aggressive feeding fish, the new species quickly replaced largemouth bass as Keowee's primary black bass. No one, other than the biologists, gave much thought to the swap over in targeted bass species because the spotted bass were a quarry not widely found at the time and they fight hard on sporting tackle.

At Keowee, the prolific breeding turned against all species involved. The largemouth bass contin-



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**Lake Russell guide Wendell Wilson shows the difference between a spotted bass on the left and the largemouth bass on the right. Unlike largemouths, spotted bass were illegally introduced to many Upstate lakes where they have a tendency to over-populate.**

ued to suffer as well as the little known native redeye bass, which were found to hybridize with spotted bass.

Even Keowee's black crappie populations, scratching out an existence in the upper creek arms of the lake were finding it hard to out-compete spotted bass for the infertile lake's food supply.

SCDNR biologist Dan Rankin summed up the problem.

"Bass fishermen have done an outstanding job instilling the practice of catch-and-release into their sport," he said.

"The problem is this tradition was passed on to the spotted bass, so instead of harvesting this fish and helping control their numbers, they were returned to the lake."

Proposed fisheries legislation introduced during the last state congressional session and expected to be passed this session includes regulations that would decrease the creel limit on largemouth and smallmouth bass to five while keeping the number of spotted bass that can be harvested from Lake Keowee and the Savannah chain to remain at 10 per person.

When asked what the solution might be to help return the balance to Keowee's fish stocks as well as numbers on other lakes such as Russell, Rankin stated the obvious.

"The spotted bass is in the sunfish family, which means they have a white, flaky meat and are generally considered to be good to eat," he said. "I suggest if you fish on Lake Keowee and catch some

spotted bass, take them home and eat them."

Guide Wendell Wilson couldn't agree more. He has watched the change occur on Lake Russell and where much of his client's catches consisted of crappie, striped bass and largemouth bass just a few years ago.

"We catch spotted bass trolling deep water

for striped bass and we catch spotted bass while casting the banks for largemouth bass and we catch spotted bass fishing brush piles for crappie," he said. "No matter what you do down here, it's hard to get away from them."

Despite the change in his catch, neither Wilson nor his clients are complaining. He said that most of the anglers who seek him out to take them fishing are happy just to catch fish and with a scrappy fight on the line and mild flavor on the table, Wilson is happy to send his customers home with a cooler full of spotted bass.

One area of some concern is that anglers looking to harvest some spotted bass for the table educate themselves on the differences between spotted bass and largemouth bass.

Though the colorations and markings are similar, the largemouth has its characteristic extended upper jaw line, which protrudes past the eye. If you put your finger in the fish's mouth, a largemouth has a smooth tongue while the spotted bass has a rough patch.

One final way to distinguish the spotted bass is to examine the base of the tail for the dark spot which is absent on the largemouth — which brings us back to where we started: seeing spots.