Try fishing stump flats for early season catfish

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
THE JOURNAL

With most area lake levels hovering well below full pool at what has become the norm for late winter around the Upstate, anglers who take to the water learn to keep a sharp look out for submerged stumps.

The prospect of replacing a lower unit or propeller is not something you want to happen just before fishing season hits it's stride.

While you're thinking about boating around the stumps, now is a good time to consider fishing in them, especially if your quarry is slimy and sports whiskers.

Stump flats are a great place to find and catch late winter catfish and the tactics are pretty simple. All you need is a good stump flat in the 10 – 30 foot range, some fresh bait, and some stout tackle.

Perry Evatte, who lives in Pickens County, looks forward to this time of year when both baitfish and catfish flock to old dead wood. Evatte said many anglers are afraid of casting about in the presence of wood for fear of hanging up, but he said you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.

"Ideally, you'll have a creek channel that offers deeper water with stumps or timber on both sides," he said. "The fish might be in different depths at different times of day, but if there's baitfish in the area, I can almost guarantee catfish won't be far away."

Evatte will anchor from the front of the boat, usually in the middle of the channel. He prefers not to anchor the rear of the boat. He said that catfish are not particularly spooky, but the less invasive he can be, the better his chances of getting on the fish are.

The angler typically sets up rods using fresh cut herring baited on a hand made Carolina rig dropped straight down on either side of the boat. He positions these three turns off the bottom then casts several other lines out around the boat's perimeter from the bow. He places each rod in a rod holder with reels engaged but allows enough slack to let the line billow out from the rod and give the fish enough time to take the bait.

"You want to try to arrange the baits so that they are at different depths," he said. "By casting some lines out away from the boat in all directions and some of the baits straight down, especially right beside these old trees, I'm trying to cover all the bases."

Evatte describes the rig he and several other catfish anglers use to keep from hanging up in all the flooded timber. The weight consists of a five inch length of parachord stuffed with #3 lead shot and crimped on each end. This type of weight tends to pull through snags rather than catch in them as conventional weights will do.

The weighted chord is secured to the main line via a snap swivel that allows the weight to slide. The main line, 30 pound Super mono, is connected to a short length of 18 inch leader by a high strength barrel swivel. A 3/0 Kahle hook rounds out the rig at the other end of the leader.

Evatte's tackle consists of medium heavy baitcast rods matched with medium capacity baitcast reels. For bait the angler uses a variety of cut gizzard shad and herring that can be caught a day before or bought at local bait shops.

One benefit of not using two anchors is that he has no qualms about moving. He explained that if he doesn't get a bite within twenty minutes of setting up at one location, he will move on to another spot, even if that's only a couple hundred yards up or back on the same channel.

"To me, a school of catfish is like a herd of cattle, they'll graze along that channel in no hurry," he said. "Where you get one bite, you're likely to get another two or three before you need to pick up and move on."

PHILLIP GENTRY is the host of "Upstate Outdoors," broadcast from noon to 2 p.m. Saturdays on 106.3 WORD FM. This week's guest on the show will be Larry Ross, speaking about primitive/survival skills. Contact Gentry at pgentry6@bellsouth.net.