

Try these two patterns for spring catfish

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
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With warmer weather in abundance across the Upstate over the past week, it's hard not to think about getting out and going fishing. The dilemma becomes which species to fish for, because practically everything is in the mood to bite.

One group of fish often goes unnoticed under the radar for springtime fishing — catfish. Our Upstate lakes are blessed with an abundance of fish, most of which fall into three main species — blue catfish, flathead catfish and channel catfish. While blues and flatheads may not be in every lake, it's almost a sure bet that channel catfish are.

Veteran catfish angler Wes Barton loves fishing for catfish on many Upstate lakes and splits his time mostly between Hartwell and Clarks Hill, although on occasion he'll venture down to Murray. Barton said most of the big lakes will fish pretty similarly in the spring.

"There's a better large catfish pattern going on down the lakes. I'm talking fish in the 20-plus pound range," he said. "But if your goal is eating sized catfish in the 3- to 5-pound range, then we need to head up the lake, especially if there's a tailrace area from the lake above."

Barton said the big difference is water depth. He looks for larger blue catfish to hold in the 20- to 40-foot range along the tops of river channels



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When it comes to spring fishing, catfish often slip under the radar.

and ledges. That water is adjacent to 40- to 60-foot depths. That's going to take place down the lake.

"I start out around the mouths of the tributaries that feed into the main lake from halfway down the lake to the dam," Barton said. "I'm slow-trolling a bottom rig. Some people call it a float rig or a catfish drift rig. I think the original name was the Santee drift rig."

Using four rods, Barton will pull two drift rigs on either side of the boat and hang two rods with a Carolina rig off the side. The Carolina rigs are positioned about 2 feet off the bottom, and he monitors the depth to make sure he doesn't drag the rig into bottom structure.

"For trophy catfishing, I'm using 7.5-foot heavy action rods with baitcasting reels, 80-pound braided line and red circle hooks in size 5/0 to 8/0," he said. "I'm pulling cut white perch. I prefer to use only the head section with about 2 inches of the body attached."

Using his iPilot trolling motor, Barton will drag the baits along the tops of the channel edges staying within 20 feet of the edges. The ideal speed is .3 to .6 mph. While targeting the tops of river channels and ledges in a lake the size of Clarks Hill may seem daunting, Barton narrows down his search area using his sonar equipment.

"I don't put lines in

unless I see both fish and baitfish in these areas," he said. "Even if I see fish but no bait, I'll move on because those fish aren't active, and you can waste a lot of time on inactive fish."

On the other end of the scale, and the lake, Barton targets a 50-50 mix of channel catfish and small blue catfish by drifting with the current about a quarter of a mile below the Russell — and sometimes Hartwell — dam.

His set-up for this type of fishing is four to six medium action catfish poles and 10- to 12-pound monofilament line using a Kentucky rig with a 1-ounce weight on the bottom and two droppers with 3/0-5/0 kahlehooks up the line about a foot or two apart.

Barton's bait of choice for this style of fishing is Catawba worms, which he orders frozen. If the worms aren't unavailable, his next baits in order of preference are whole nightcrawlers and then frozen shrimp. Barton absolutely refuses to allow any stink bait on his boat.

He may do one, two or three drifts with the current until he's got a cooler full of nice, eating-sized catfish.

"Nothing better after a good day on the water than dressing some out, rolling them in egg, then corn meal, and dropping them in a pan of peanut oil," Barton said. "Best eating there is."

PHILLIP GENTRY is a freelance outdoor writer and the host of PG & Boatgirl Outdoors. Download the podcast on Apple, Google Play, Spotify or at pgandboatgirl.com.