

OUTDOORS

Jocassee holds more than 1 species of bass

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
FOR THE JOURNAL

Ask any Upstate bass angler which lake holds the most potential for trophy-sized largemouth bass, and the answer is usually split between the Santee Cooper lakes in the Low Country and Lake Jocassee in the far northwest corner of the state.

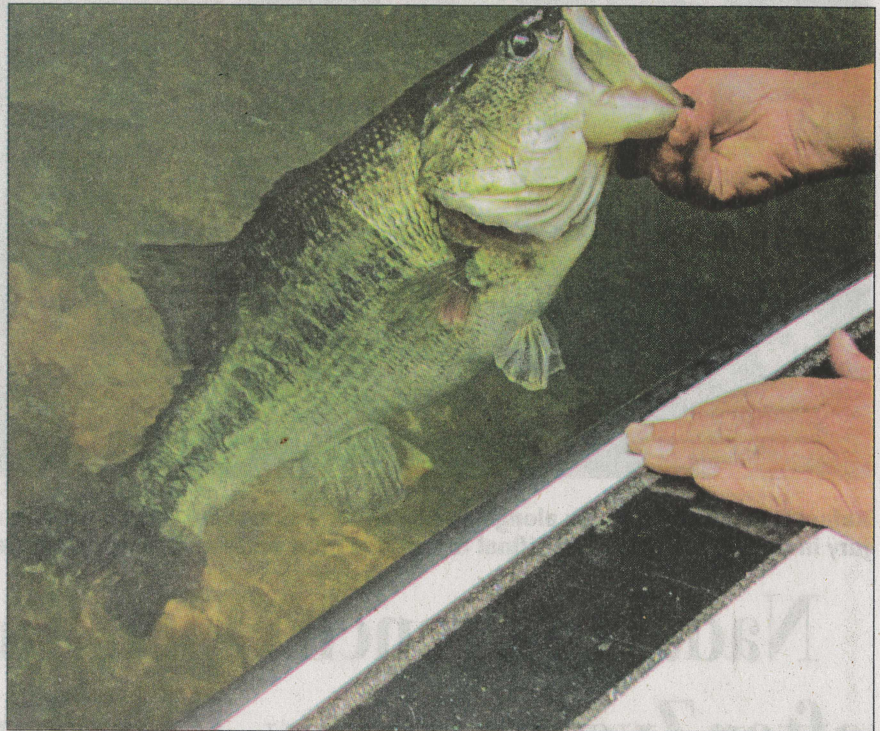
Although official records are not kept, Jocassee probably produces as many 10-pound largemouth as both Santee-Cooper lakes combined.

However, largemouth bass are not the only black bass species that call Lake Jocassee home. Like largemouth bass, the smallmouth, redeye and spotted bass that live in the lake frequently grow to phenomenal sizes. In fact, Jocassee is home to all but the largemouth bass in terms of state-record fish.

"We've got some good redeye, smallmouth and spotted bass that swim in here, too," noted Upstate outdoorsman and retired fishing guide Monty McGuffin said. "Each fish has its subtle differences in how they relate to the lake. The smallmouth is probably the most unique. There's a few guys who have figured the smallies out, but most anglers catch smallmouth by accident fishing for largemouth bass.

"You can target smallmouth up against the rocks using small jigs, and the float-and-fly pattern using a cork to suspend a jig right off the rocks. That sometimes works real well up here."

Biologists are at odds with how to manage the interaction between the native redeye bass that are home to Jocassee and the spotted bass that have found their way in from other lakes. Spotted bass interbreed with the redeyes and even some of the native shoal bass in the lake, causing a hybridized species that is threatening to wipe



COURTESY OF RON AHLE

Known for producing trophy-sized largemouth bass, largemouths are not the only black bass species that can be found in Lake Jocassee.

out pure strains of both the redeye and shoal bass.

"You'd have a hard time telling some of these fish apart — they've all mixed in together," McGuffin said. "Some will have the markings of a redeye, but then you look closer and it's really a spotted bass, and then the mouths of both of those fish are generally smaller, so a lot of people mistake them for a smallmouth."

While the past and current history of the trophy bass fishery on Jocassee is bright, many anglers are concerned with two facets of the fishery that threaten to diminish its luster. The first is environmental in nature, while the second is man-made.

"Water levels are in a constant state of fluctuation on Jocassee because of the water pump-back operations that go on there between Jocassee and Keowee and Jocassee

and Bad Creek Reservoirs," McGuffin said.

McGuffin said he'd like to see Duke Energy — the owner and operator of Lake Jocassee — work closer with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources to the degree that would maintain stable water levels when bass are at their peak spawning. He said he has seen the devastating effects of this firsthand.

"I've been out several times and seen a 5-, 6-, 7-pound female on a nest laying in 3 feet of water," McGuffin said. "She won't bite, so I'll go back the next day to try her again and the water level has dropped 4 feet overnight. Well, there goes that entire class of fish. Those eggs are gone, never to return."

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.