

OUTDOOR OBSERVANCES THIS WEEK

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By Luke Clayton, Outdoors Editor

I never cease to be amazed at how repetitive and yet completely new the outdoors is. By “repetitive,” I am referring to how nature’s cycle repeats itself year after year. I’m sure that most anyone that has the privileged of being outside on a regular basis and especially on the same land each year are in awe watching game; fish and plants throughout the seasons. My use of the words “completely new” is a bit more difficult to explain. Each year, I see early arriving blue wing teal come to the ponds in early September, followed by the parade of “big ducks”, the gadwall, widgeon, blue bills and finally mallards when the ice and snow up north pushes them down. I also marvel that the way Mother Nature gives them the cue, usually sometime in early March, that it’s time to once again follow the age old migration routes back up to northern climes.

Many readers of this column have come to learn that I live very close to a tract of land where I spend time almost on a daily basis, either hunting, fishing or simply walking from spot to spot checking game cameras. I’ve come to know these couple hundred acres like the back of my hand and have spent the past 14 or so years enjoying this little piece of remote land that is not grazed, but left in its natural state for fish and wildlife.

Around mid May each summer, I begin watching the soft ground for the tracks of newborn whitetail fawns. I usually don’t see any indication of newborns until June, but I know the gestation period for white tail deer is 201 days or about 29 weeks. I was there with my bow during the early stages of the rut, back in October but around here the serious breeding takes place in very late October and early November. It’s possible for fawns to be born in May, but because of the timing of the rut here, they are usually born in early June. Year after year, I’ve watched this cycle repeat itself and feel privileged to have the opportunity to witness this marvelous yearly occurrence in the natural world.

While checking one of my “baited holes” for hogs last week, I walked through a little clearing with a heavy stand of dewberry bushes. An area the size of a two-car garage had recently been rooted up by hogs. I’ve witnessed this same occurrence at this exact spot for the past several years. I remember in years past for several nights, the hogs rooted up the roots of these berry vines, and then abandoned them the rest of the year, but why? Could it be the rising sap in the roots that triggers the hogs to feed?

A few years ago, I studied to become a Master Texas Naturalist and I truly believe the most important thing I learned in this excellent course was how to be really observant and look a bit deeper into things I encountered while in the outdoors. Regardless how observant and how much we study, we will never learn it all. My teachers were each experts in different fields, some knew everything about birds, and others were plant experts, specializing in trees or grasses, others were highly trained in the study of reptiles. I'm positive that one could spend a lifetime studying only one aspect of the outdoors and still not learn it all. I can truly say that since completing the Texas Master Naturalist course, I started seeing the outdoors in an entirely different light. Take the rooted up berry vines as an example.

Before learning to look closely at what I see in the outdoors, I would have simply noted that hogs had been in the area without wondering *why* they feed on the root system of the plants at a specific time each year. At the present, I still can't tell you the reason for the hog's springtime feeding habits but, rest assured, I will be quizzing some of my wildlife biologist buddies to find the answer!



Photo by Luke Clayton

[Fishing for both channel and blue catfish has been excellent at Lake Texoma the past few weeks. This good eating channel cat, and many others, went for punch bait last week in 7 feet of water.]

FISHING UPDATE

This past week, I made a jaunt up to Lake Texoma to fish with my friend Larry Sparks with Sparky's Guide Service at www.sparkysguideservice.com for round two with the channel catfish. They were still biting like crazy! Sparks has a couple of spots baited with soured grain, one around structure in water seven feet deep, the other in 20 foot water. Depending upon recent passing cool fronts, the fish will be either shallow or deep. This past week, we found them in the seven-foot water, and hungry! We fished with Danny Kings Punch bait on a #4 treble hook and most strikes came within a foot or so of bottom, as is usually the case when fishing for channel catfish. We also set a few jug lines, baited with fresh shad and caught some good eating blue catfish weighing between 5-12 pounds. Although the numbers of stripers landed is not what it usually is this time of year, good size stripers in the 10-12 pound range are occurring on most trips.

I have to admit, I love catching and eating stripers, but when the catfishing is as good as it is now at Texoma, my nod goes to the whiskerfish. I am encountering one problem, though; I love them fried in hot oil until they are crispy. No better eating to my way of thinking. We had fried catfish TWICE last week during this time of plenty and a big fish fry is in the works for this week. I'd better limit my intake!!

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