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SPORTS

The magic of Caddo Lake

By Luke Clayton

Feb 14, 2016

Uncertain, Texas -- There is an intangible attraction that the big inland cypress swamp known as Caddo Lake has on people. I really don't know if it's the ancient cypress with their "old man" gray beards of Spanish Moss, the sight and sound of slowly moving water in the Cypress River or the occasional owl one disturbs from it's daytime roost while cruising through places with names such as Old Folks Playground, Government Ditch or Bradley Canal. But I know the lake keeps calling me back, year after year. For a devout fisherman such as I, a big part of the allure is the excellent fishing for several species including white and yellow bass, crappie and the low fish on the totem pole for many anglers; freshwater drum.

In this column, for many years now, I've written about my fishing trips to Caddo, usually with my friends Billy Carter who runs Johnson's Ranch Marina (www.johnsonsranchmarina.net) with his wife Dottie. The Carter's offer lodging in several fully furnished lake houses (www.spatterdock.com) and folks from across the country seek refuge here while vacationing in an area that, in a sense, time has forgotten. Johnson's Ranch Marina is the oldest continually run inland marina in Texas and each time I step up onto the wooden boardwalk leading up to the marina headquarters, I feel as though I was once again 16 years old, retracing the same steps I took back in the mid sixties.

I never get tired of fishing, hunting or simply taking scenery or wildlife pictures at Caddo. Each time I venture forth into this outdoor wonderland I experience a sensory overload of sights, sounds and smells that are uniquely Caddo. My one or two trips to Caddo each year to fish with Billy have become a homecoming of sorts, for both of us. While heading down the Cypress River to the next fishing hotspot, we often talk about when Billy first discovered that the lakes big and plentiful yellow bass were not only a tasty fish in the frying pan but a sought after species by his clients, once he learned how to consistently catch them. I remember as a fledging outdoor writer, writing about catching and eating yellow bass a couple decades ago. I received many "letters" from readers back then quizzing me on this species that was often considered "trash" fish.



Caddo guide Billy Carter with one of many fine-eating Yellow Bass landed last week from the Cypress River Channel. *photo by Luke Clayton*

Billy has fished and guided on Caddo most of his life and I don't believe there is a person alive that knows the seasonal patterns of the fish and wildlife any better. Last weeks trip, as many of past years, began at Johnson's Ranch as my friend Phil Zimmerman and I boarded Billy's roomy pontoon boat.

"Luke, the white bass have been holding in some deeper holes upriver," says Billy. "Let's head up that way and fish the main river channel a bit for them with Rooster Tails and spinners. If we don't get on them quickly, we will go directly for our favorite species, yellow

bass. I've got a bunch of baby crawfish and our old standby, minnows for the yellows. We should be able to fill the cooler!"

Our first anchor was at a cross channel, a spot with where a feeder creek pushed fresh water into the Cypress River, an excellent spot to intercept pre-spawn white bass. After multiple casts without a hookup, I anticipated Billy's next move a couple casts before I heard the verbal verification.

"Grab that anchor rope, Luke," Billy told me. "Let's head to where I know the yellows are holding."

We were soon slowly gliding down the river in Billy's big fishing barge.

"This spot should be packed with yellow bass," says my friend as we ease the anchor over the bow of the barge and the craft came about into the current.

Billy and our friend Phil Zimmerman baited small, case-hardened #4 baitkeeper hooks with small crawfish. I opted to stick with our tried and true bait, one-third sections of fresh cut live minnows. In truth, I don't think the choice of baits mattered; both offerings provided quick hook ups with feisty yellow bass.

But, it took me a "bite" or two to get the hang of getting the hook set. At times, the ten to thirteen inch yellow bass will savagely nail baits and on light spinning rigs, they are a great deal of fun to catch. On this trip, the fish were hugging bottom and simply sucking the baits in. I found it necessary to cast, allow the bait to hit bottom and then retrieve with a very slow crank of the reel's handle. As soon as the line felt "heavy", I would give the rod a "pop" and set the hook. Once hooked the feisty little battlers fought as hard as ever.

In short order, our fish cooler was filled with what would become the making of a fine mid winter fried fish dinner. For a change of scenery more than anything else, we again pulled anchor and enjoyed a twenty minute boat ramp through some of the most scenic parts of the upper end of Caddo. A mile into this boat ride, I would have had to use a compass to find my way back to Johnson's Ranch but Billy knew every turn of the main river channel and, connecting channels. We popped out into the section of lake known locally as "Big Lake" and then weaved our way through the Cypress to the main channel.

A mile or so above Johnson's Ranch, Billy stopped at one of our old yellow bass holes and we baited with bits of minnow. Where you find yellow bass, you usually catch yellow bass exclusively. Here we didn't feel that "soft" bite of the yellows but rather a savage strike. We had stopped smack dab in the middle of a hole tightly packed with freshwater drum. Just like yellow bass, many anglers have no idea just how tasty fresh drum are. Granted, their fillets are thickest up close to the front of the fish and taper off a bit more quickly than many species but they are excellent eating and have no more bones than any other fish. They are filleted exactly the same way. Many times, I have "tested" fish eaters at fish fries with drum cooked separately from white bass and the vast majority of times, my guests cannot tell the difference in taste. It is important to place any drum on ice quickly, regardless whether it be a saltwater red drum (redfish), black drum or freshwater drum. This insures the flesh stays firm and tasty.

An interesting side note to this trip was the number of wild hogs and their rooting we discovered. Billy is making plans to offer wild hogs hunts and if things go according to plan,

many of the remote hunting areas will be reached via boat. I'll keep you posted on this as the plans develop!

For more information on Caddo Lake, give Billy Carter a call at 903-407- 7368.

A heartfelt thanks to all the folks that dropped by Hooten's Hardware in Emory this past Saturday to visit with me at the book signing where we celebrated the publishing of my new book on hog hunting, *Kill To Grill, The Ultimate Guide to Wild Hog Hunting and... Cooking*.

Listen to Outdoors with Luke Clayton on radio stations from Nebraska to Texas on weekends or anytime online at www.catfishradio.com.

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