

Tailwaters, micro-lites & the buffet table

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By JOHN L. SLOAN

They did not turn the generators on until 11 a.m. As hot as it was, a mere 94 degrees, I have no idea why they waited that long. Finally, they did and the fun began.

We had been catching catfish in the shade of the big Chickamauga Dam since seven. We caught and released 25-30 cats in the 5-15 pound range and now it was time to try something else, drifting in the tailwaters for whatever hit.

There is nothing unusual about fishing tailwater. What made what we were doing unusual was how we were doing it and what we were using for tackle. It also made it fun and challenging. As everybody knows, Judge Dave Durham and I are all about challenge.

We were joined on this morning by fellow outdoor writer and fishing guide, Richard Simms of Scenic City Fishing Charters. Richard is a master at what we were about to do. He is also all about challenge and proved it when he passed out the equipment.

The Equipment -- The Judge had a standard medium light action, open face spinning reel with 6-pound mono. Richard and I had tiny, litty-bitty micro-lites with 4-pound mono and toy-looking reels. We, you see, really like a challenge. As you will see later, there was a method to the madness. On each rod was tied a 1/32 ounce bluegill jig and tipped with a live shiner.

The Method -- Okay. Now we start the educational part of this column. Most people when fishing in the tailwater use heavy weight to get the bait down on the bottom. Yes, for stripers and catfish that works. But think about it. The shad and other bait fish come out of the boils and are pushed by the current.

They flitter and flutter and drift downstream, swimming upstream from time to time as they hit eddies. That is their natural movement. Bait with an ounce sinker attached cannot do that and so does not appear as natural. However, a shiner or shad with a 1/32-ounce jig in his mouth and slowed only slightly by the drag of line is just what a feeding fish is looking for. Game On!

The Game -- Dave had the first strike, a screamer that never slowed down before pulling the hook loose. Hard to say what it was. Then I nailed a fat spotted bass of about a pound and a half. Dave hooked a blue cat in the two-pound range and we were at the end of the drift. Richard hit the big engine and we fired back up to the boils again.

This time Richard moved the boat over a few feet to take a slightly different downstream drift. I missed a strike and he nailed something we all assumed was a catfish. Wrong. Four minutes of finesse work and a gagger smallmouth swirled at the boat. A minute later and I was able to lip fish. Not once did it jump, strange for a smallmouth. A drift or two later, the exact same thing happened with a 2-1/2 pound smallie. Hiz Honor hooked into and I was able to lip it also. We had no net.

Each drift produced one to four fish in varieties including stripe, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, spotted bass, catfish and a couple we couldn't identify. Yes, you can land big fish on extremely light tackle even in tailwaters and without a net if you know what you are doing and how to do it.

Here is Why -- It is strange that a fish predisposed to aerial antics as is the smallmouth would not jump. None of the smallmouth or even the spotted bass we caught jumped, a maneuver that often dislodges the hook. Our thinking is that this is attributable to the micro light tackle. Because it does not place heavy pressure on the fish, rather leads them instead of pulling them, they do not feel the need to jump. They come to the boat, perhaps not willingly but at least not in a dogged resistance.

To accomplish this with a rod and reel weighing in ounces and measuring less than four feet in length does take some skill and practice.

One must resist the urge to resist when the fish runs and the reel must not only have a quality drag but the drag must be properly adjusted.

Gentle pressured is applied and kept constant until the fish begins to tire. When all is in sync, big fish can be boated.

Not all water flowing from a dam is suitable for this type of fishing. For example, the Caney Fork is not. It is too narrow and swift. The river must be wide enough to allow the water to spread out providing a variety of drifts. It also seems shallower downstream waters are better. Obstructions such as rocks and bridge pilings provide safe, calm havens for the fish to “hold” in while waiting to ambush their dinner as it drifts naturally by.

So give it a try. Hard to tell what you will catch in the tailwater buffet table.

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