

OUTDOORS

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 18, 2004 | WWW.KENTUCKY.COM | LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER

BRAVING THE ELEMENTS

Winter fishing for smallmouth bass on Dale Hollow Lake



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PEA RIDGE, Tenn. — John Davis can overlook the hardships of winter smallmouth bass fishing on Dale Hollow Lake because he knows the rewards will be big.

Big, as in 20-inch brown fish. "Sometimes I get so cold I have to stop the boat and stick my hands down inside my coveralls for a while. They just go numb," said Davis, 33, who grew up in Frankfort fishing for smallmouth bass on Elkhorn Creek.

When the air temperature at dawn is in the 20s, a 10-minute high speed boat ride across the lake makes your eyes weep, your head ache with debilitating cold, and your finger tips feel like they have turned to stone. Some mornings the fog is so thick you need a global positioning system to just find your way out onto the main lake. And most days the guides on your fishing rod clog up with ice.

Davis ignores all that and focuses on smallmouth bass, the fish of his dreams. "I like their fight, their heart, the way they jump," said the licensed fishing guide, who has a modest fishing camp overlooking the East Fork of Lick Run, a few minutes drive from Holly Creek Marina.

He has been winter fishing on Dale Hollow Lake since 1994. He does some jigging with spoons and Silver Buddy crankbaits, but most of the time he casts tiny jigs, rigged on 10 feet of six-pound test monofilament line below a plastic bobber. The finesse presentation, called Float 'n' Fly, is his go-to technique for catching quality fish.

"I start fishing it when water temperatures drop into the low 50s in early December," Davis said. "For this early (in the winter) I've caught more big fish than in the past nine years."

The Float 'n' Fly is a consistent producer of quality fish, but catching numbers is much harder because of the influence



John Davis has been winter fishing on Dale Hollow Lake in Pea Ridge, Tenn., since 1994. Davis has a modest fishing camp overlooking the East Fork of Lick Run near Holly Creek Marina.

PHOTOS BY
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STAFF

about anywhere."

He tends to fish in more shallow water, too. "In super clear water, fish are looking up and come up to take a lure, so I start fishing shallow and work my way deeper."

On a calm day he fishes with the jig suspended 12 to 13 feet below the float. "Wind moves the fish up because it breaks the light penetration," Davis said he generally has the most luck keeping the jig about 10 feet below the bobber.

The presentation is exact. "Work slow, make long casts, and cast several times in an area where you're finding fish," Davis said. "When the jig settles, shake the rod tip and reel in the line slowly."

Davis recommends keeping the slack out of the line so you can get a good hook set, and use the wind to naturally drift the lure over the target cover.

Not all strikes are obvious. "You have to really watch the float," Davis said. "Sometimes it doesn't go under. It just spins or goes over on its side."

Davis fishes a 9 1/2-foot light-action rod, with his spinning reel spooled in six-pound test line. "Four-pound line casts easier, but it's likely to break your heart on a big fish."

He attaches the bobber by wrapping the line three times around its brass stem, but cautions that the line must be checked frequently, and re-tied after every fish to avoid a breakoff. He prefers an unweighted, pear-shaped plastic float.

"A lighter bobber is more sensitive to strikes, and will lay over on its side when the jig is on the bottom," Davis said.

As for jigs, Davis prefers 1/16-ounce, and never fishes 1/32-ounce. "I like 1/8-ounce jigs on really windy days."

The jigs are tied with many colors of craft hair, a synthetic material that doesn't absorb water and fluffs out when the jig is moved. This gives the appearance of a struggling minnow, helpless and thermally stressed. The bass sucks in the jig and the bobber goes under.

That's when Davis sets the hook and a big grin spreads across his face.

How to make Davis your fishing guide

John Davis is a licensed fishing guide operating as Smallmouth Specialty.

"I enjoy winter fishing," said Davis, who lives in Anderson County. "And I prefer to fish weekdays." To reach Davis call his cell phone at (859) 621-4559.

The fee is \$250 a day for one or two anglers. Tackle can be provided. Davis is strictly a catch-and-release angler.

For information visit his Web site at: www.smallmouthspecialty.com.
ART LANDER JR.

of weather. "The ideal scenario is a front with wind, which helps break the surface and creates current," Davis said. "The hardest fishing is on calm, clear days. You have to fish shady banks and generally you won't catch (big) numbers of fish."

Water conditions are also a big factor.

"When the lake is coming up, smallmouth bass tend to suspend more. When the lake



Davis prefers fishing for smallmouth bass. "I like their fight, their heart, the way they jump."

level is falling it's tough, no matter the fishing technique."

In about 13 hours on the water, Tuesday and Wednesday, Davis and I boated eight smallmouth bass and hooked several others that got off. Only one bass was under three pounds, three were just a few ounces shy of five pounds, and four were solid four-pounders. Fishing was tough, by day-to-day standards, because of the

bright sun and calm winds.

Davis approaches fishing the Float 'n' Fly a bit different in terms of the banks he fishes, their depth, and the distance he fishes from the bank. He thinks that bass travel around less during the winter, but move up and down more in the water column. They tend to congregate in small areas. "You can cast your lure 10 feet either way and not get a bite."

While the conventional wisdom is that smallmouth bass suspend off bluff walls and stay near deep water channels all the time in winter, Davis thinks differently.

"In a lot of situations I think bass are relating more to the bottom than the bank," Davis said. "They can suspend anywhere, as long as there's cover."

This includes humps on broad flats, dropoffs, weed beds and main lake points. He also fishes cuts and irregularities in the banks, rock slides, or transitions in the bank composition. "When the water is cool their comfort zone is greatly expanded. I believe bass can be just