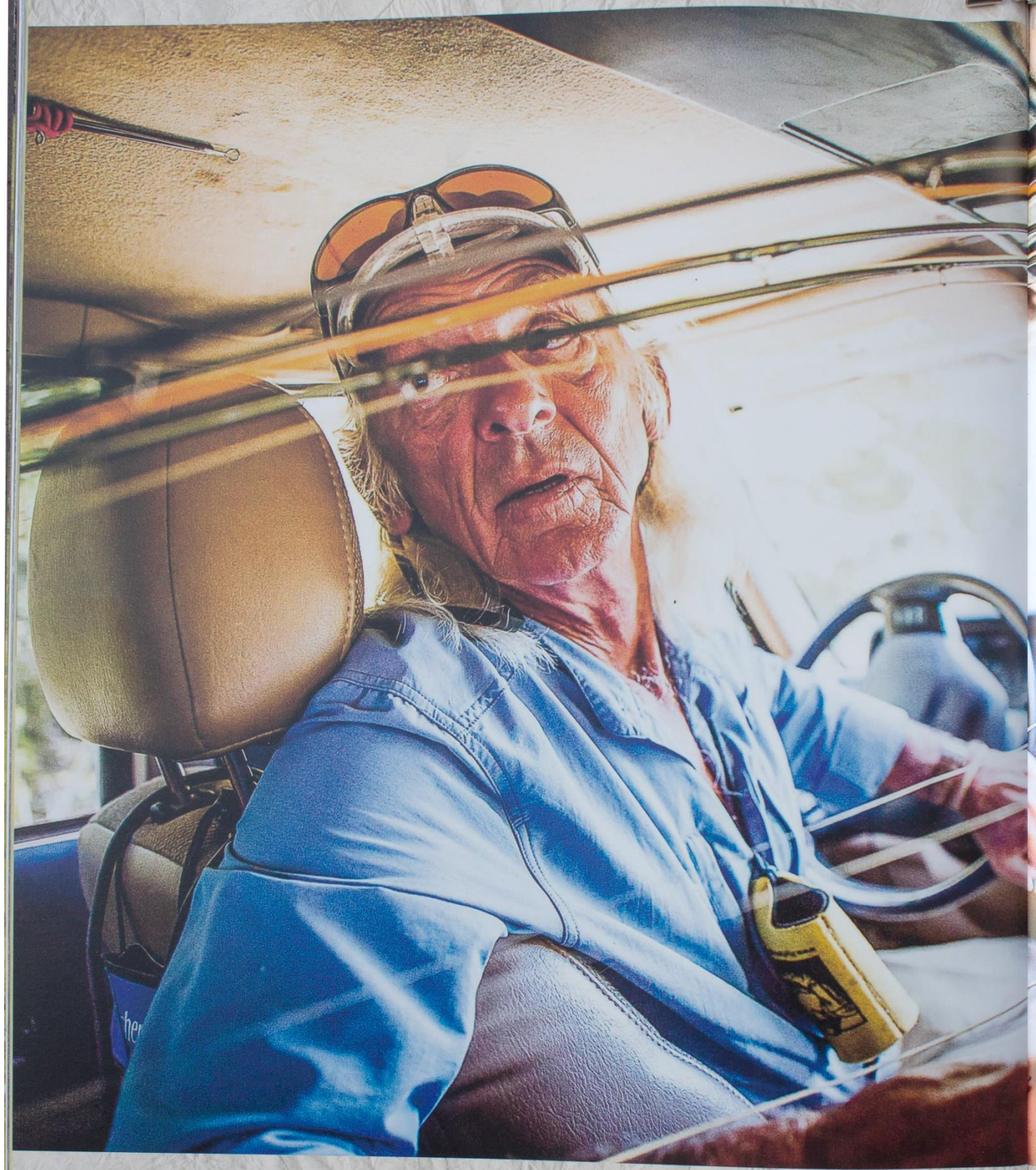


SHOAL BASS AND SMILES

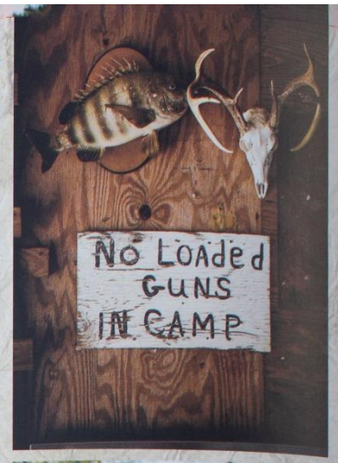
By David Cannon

Bumping down a red clay road, cutting through a jungle of pine, with air rushing through the windows and Duane Allman's Les Paul blaring out the stereo, I'm in a familiar position: I'm in the rear seat of Kent Edmonds' Jeep. The other two-thirds of the back seat is occupied by a mound of boat bags, fly boxes, soft coolers, and my camera gear. In the front seats, Kent, the sage of Southern warmwater fly fishing, drives while his friend Robert rides shotgun. As I try to operate my camera I am continually bombarded by the half-dozen fly rods rattling overhead. The clay two-track veers past an ancient Confederate cemetery that has nearly been overtaken by the woods. Kent is taking us to a wild middle-Georgia river that's home to perhaps the finest native gamefish in the South, or at least my favorite one: *micropterus cataractae*. The shoal bass.

If you scroll through social media these days and come across fly fishing imagery from Georgia, too often you'll find yourself looking at some obese monstrosity of a stocked trout living within the happy confines of private water. Its girth is often greater than its length. Its miniscule beak is just big enough to suck in a trout-chow pellet. Too often the misnomer of "wild" or "stream-born" will be applied to this fish. By reasonable sporting standards, any fish that has ever known the taste of pellet ceases to be wild.

If we anthropomorphized the two aforementioned fish, the shoal bass, which has known its home waters for thousands of generations, is like Crazy Horse astride his war steed, riding a high Western plain, shooting airborne grasshoppers with an easy grace: Native, beautiful, perfectly adapted to the environment, self-sufficient, and wild. *Salmo pelletae*, by contrast, whose ancestors were hatched and reared via hatchery workers, is as wild as Roseanne's Dan Conner loping across his air-conditioned living room to grab a cold one out of the fridge. Dan Conner is still entertaining. But there will be no colossal monument of his image carved out of a mountainside.

Kent had called me earlier in the spring



to let me know he had gained access to a friend's hunting tract that bordered the Flint River, the crown jewel of shoal bass flows. If you've spent more than five minutes listening to bro-country in the last few years, you've probably heard the Flint mentioned a few times between continual references to partying, girls, and trucks. In which case, you might get the idea the Flint is a horrible place. But the Flint isn't some quasi-country beer-fueled party spot.

This wild river, which cuts through the middle of the state, begins its life as a spring bubbling from the ground next to a Delta Airlines maintenance hangar at the world's busiest airport. It then continues southwest from Atlanta toward the Alabama line where it joins the Chattahoochee. In a few stretches it cuts between bluffs that make you think you're hours north in the Appalachians. The area is known for Indian artifacts, oddities like the two intact whale skeletons that were found here, and a smattering of megalodon teeth pried from its banks. It passes by sleepy Southern towns and through woods that hold whitetail bucks that could one day end up on the cover of this magazine.

Within this setting, chasing shoal bass with Kent Edmonds is like taking a stroll through Montana with Meriwether Lewis. Beneath a TFO ball cap and long, white locks, Kent's mind contains nearly every eddy, creek mouth, ledge, and blowdown anywhere shoal

bass swim. He knows these fish: what they like and don't like, subtleties between good and great habitat, and how to feed them. And not with pellets, just to be clear.

To say I was excited to fish with Kent is a huge understatement. The last time I fished with him we hiked down a wide, shallow stretch of the Flint that led to a steep section of river with water features that were not quite falls, but close. The next six hours were some of the best fishing I've ever experienced. If I ventured a guess at how many shoal bass we released that day, you would call me a liar. If today turned out to be half as good as that day, it was going to be incredible. When you're shoulder-to-shoulder with someone like Kent (and every great river has a Kent or two) any day could turn into one for the memory books.

Shoalies are a unique species of black bass, whose native range includes only the Chattahoochee and Apalachicola River drainages. You'll hear a lot of folks mistakenly call them redeyes, or you'll hear anglers in non-shoalie rivers call other river bass subspecies "shoal bass," but there's only one true shoal bass. All the others are fun to chase, but the real deal is the king of Southern river bass. The world record is somewhere around nine pounds, but fighting a two-pounder on a 7-weight is a battle. Three- and four-pound shoalies aren't uncommon in certain places, but the trophy mark in most anglers' minds is measured in inches—and, like trout, 20 seems to be the agreed-upon standard.

The stretch of river we were fishing that day included a long run of braided grass beds that cut in and out of the main river flow. At times Kent looked like he was laying out a long cast into the middle of a pasture. Then a shoalie would rocket airborne out of the river, Kent fighting it with one hand while holding a lit cigar in the other, a permanent grin plastered across his face.

When I think of Kent, this is the image I always see, and it in turn makes me smile. Kent and I are probably at different points on the political spectrum, though we've never discussed it, but we are in close agreement on more important topics such as fishing and friendship.

The heat beat us down that day, with the long summer hours underscoring the need for shade and hydration. We didn't want the day to end, and we simultaneously longed for the trees on the horizon to overtake the sun. Robert lost a five-pounder—akin to losing a 10-pound trout—and carried that post-adrenaline awe and disappointment the rest of the day. The fishing wasn't quite what it had been on that incredible day before, but the numbers were good and a few nice fish made it to hand.

I remember Kent pointing a foot upstream of a rock line, where the water smoothly began to rise before it rolled in a half-circle over the submerged rocks. He said, "They

really like to hold in spots like that," made one cast with his signature stealth bomber fly, gave it a pop and let it drift. Less than two feet into the drift, a shoal bass rose and attacked. Kent continued to smile. How many shoal bass will he catch before they no longer coax a smile from him? The likely answer is that it's a number unattainable in a lifetime.

The day ended the way it began: three guys bouncing down a red-clay two-track, more Allman Brothers and remembering the day we were trying to envision just hours before. Now that straining for clarity had been replaced by vivid memories of sun and fish and smiles.

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