

A photograph of a dirt road winding through a forest of tall pine trees. The road is made of reddish-brown clay and is flanked by green grass and foliage. The trees are tall and thin, with dense green needles. The sky is visible through the canopy of the trees.

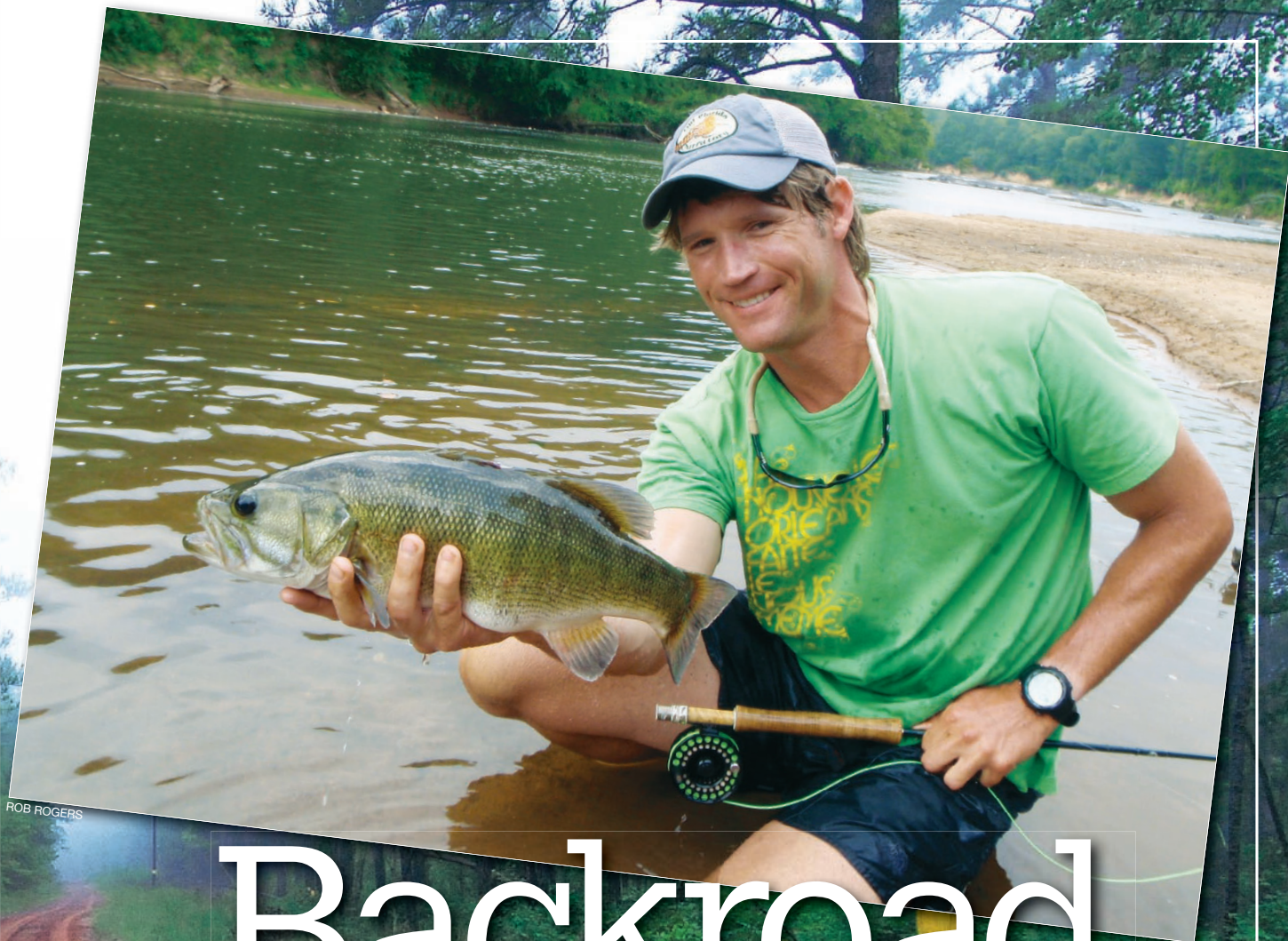
Red clay is amazingly sticky.

Mix three inches of rain with a Georgia dirt road made out of the stuff, and you can lose a car in it. On the upside, I've found that most red-dirt roads in the South lead to out-of-the-way rivers, many with good fishing. Maybe that inaccessibility is why one of the region's best game fishes remained unrecognized by science until 1999. That's when Dr. James Williams and Dr. George Burgess, both researchers with the Florida Museum of Natural History, formally described the shoal bass for the first time.

Though similar in appearance to their black bass cousins, shoal bass are in fact unique. They resemble an oversized cross between the red-eye bass (a smallish cousin of the largemouth bass) and a smallmouth. Their similarity to the red-eye led scientists to consider them part of the same species, until the advent of gene testing showed them to be different. Those scientists might have done well to talk to some southwest

Background: Middle Georgia is famous for its red-dirt roads and, increasingly, its shoal bass fishery. *Right:* Catch a shoalie this size, and you'll probably end up in a magazine spread. The average fish is about a pound.

ZACH MATTHEWS



ROB ROGERS

Backroad **BULLIES**

Once an overlooked and unrecognized species, Georgia's hard-fighting shoal bass are quickly becoming a destination warmwater target.

by Zach Matthews

Georgia old-timers, who as far back as the 1940s knew that the shoal bass was a unique fish, primarily due to its size. Whereas a red-eye bass tops out at about 19 inches and a couple of pounds, the shoal bass has been certified up to 8 pounds 12 ounces.

According to Dr. Gary Grossman, who pens *American Angler's* "Dr. Trout" column and is a fisheries-science specialist at the University of Georgia, the shoal bass differs from the red-eye both genetically and morphologically. "The shoal bass is part of what we call a 'species complex,'" Dr. Grossman explains. "With genetic testing, we've come to realize that the fish we were calling 'red-eye bass' are actually a number of unique species. It just happens that the shoal bass and the Suwanee bass were the first of that group to be described separately."

Shoal bass don't just differ from other red-eye basses in their looks; they also behave rather uniquely. "At times they can act a lot like a trout," says Georgia guide and recognized shoalie

only the Florida panhandle. Above Chattahoochee, Florida, the river splits into two main branches: the the Flint River and the Chattahoochee River, which flows through and waters Atlanta.

Both the "Hooch" and the Flint are swampy, slow rivers for most of their South Georgia paths; Gulf strippers run the rivers and compete with the shoalies for food in this area. Above Columbus, Georgia, however, the shoalies gain a decided advantage. This region lies in the Piedmont of the southernmost Appalachian Mountains and features a lot of weathered granite shoals that are wadable and productive shoalie habitat. A coldwater impoundment north of Atlanta called Lake Lanier now pretty much cuts off the northern shoalie territory, leading most fly anglers to focus on the Flint and the Hooch around Atlanta—all told, over 100 miles of productive shoal bass water.

Rigging and Tactics

Shoal bass live in a temperate warmwater environment, which is ideal for big bugs. Hellgrammites—and their adult form, the dobsonfly—make up a choice morsel throughout shoalie territory. Terrestrials such as beetles, ants, and large native roaches, as well as dragonflies, are also prolific in shoal bass water. Consequently, many successful shoal-bass anglers use a hopper-dropper system. Some shoal bass get large, but the average fish is very similar in



expert Kent Edmonds. Shoal bass favor rivers with low gradients and moderate flows. They hang out around shoals (thus their name), often waiting alongside or in front of overhanging rocks or moss tussocks midriver for prey to swim by. Whereas your typical largemouth bass likes downed trees and deep, slow water, and can best be caught with a large bait or fly thrown in and stripped quickly out, the shoalie is more likely to take a nymph, or even a dead-drifted dry fly, out in the main channel.

For this reason, shoal bass have become very popular with fly anglers—so popular that a nascent destination fishery has sprung up in the Middle Georgia area. The species is endemic (or native) to only a single drainage: the Apalachicola River system, although it has now been stocked in the Ocmulgee River drainage, as well. The Apalachicola enters the Gulf of Mexico in Apalachicola Bay, Florida. The main stem of the river is actually quite short, crossing

size and strength to a trout. Five- and 6-weight rods and appropriately matched reels with standard floating lines work great, and you can typically get away with a nine-foot 3X leader.

Guide Kent Edmonds invented a fly back in the early 1990s, during the first Gulf War, which he called a Stealth Bomber due to its delta-wing shape. The Stealth Bomber is a blatant attractor pattern; it resembles nothing, and at the same time everything. Dobsonflies, moths, large caddis, stoneflies. You name it, the Stealth Bomber can vaguely imitate it. Consequently, the pattern has become darn-near ubiquitous among shoal bass fishermen. In some cases, you'll see entire boxes stocked with nothing but Stealth Bombers in various colors. But the "hopper" component is just one part—and in some cases the least important part—of the system you'll need to successfully fish for shoalies.

The Flint and middle Chattahoochee tend to flow with slightly stained, blue-green to brown-tinted water for most of the year. Fishing is best in early spring—when many bigger fish are caught—to mid-summer, when long June and July evenings allow the bugs to rise for hours. Water levels tend to be relatively stable in that period, though increased runoff from the Atlanta area has made them somewhat less predictable in recent years (just witness last year's floods). In stained water, most trout experts will tell you to go with a dark brown or black pattern when fishing subsurface. That's good advice for shoal bass, as well. Edmonds prefers Carter's Rubber-Legged Dragon, a chenille dragonfly larvae with bead-chain eyes, as his go-to dropper, but in truth just about any big, leggy, dark nymph will work. Hare's Ears, big rubber-legged stonefly nymphs like a Bitch Creek, or even a black Woolly Bugger fished on a dead drift are all good options for your dropper. (In faster flows, you can sometimes dispense with the indicator fly altogether and just dredge the depths with these heavily weighted nymphs).

To rig your hopper-dropper setup, first tie on the hopper fly. This is usually a Stealth Bomber, but also potentially a standard popper, or a Club Sandwich or other large, preferably foam attractor. I like a nonslip mono loop knot, but you can use a Duncan's loop or a clinch knot, too. When the pattern is secure, strip off about 20 to 30 inches of 3X tippet. Double one end of the tippet over itself, making a loop about three inches long. Pinch the tip of the 3X tippet hard against itself, between

your thumb and forefinger, and push your thumb forward to spin the tippet through your fingers, making a quick hangman's noose. Slip the noose over the bend of the hopper's hook; then carefully snag the tag end out from under your pinched fingers and run it through the loop before pulling on the long end to tighten. With practice, you'll be able to make a clinch knot dropper connection like this in seconds, without fumbling for the fly or twisting up the all-important leader.

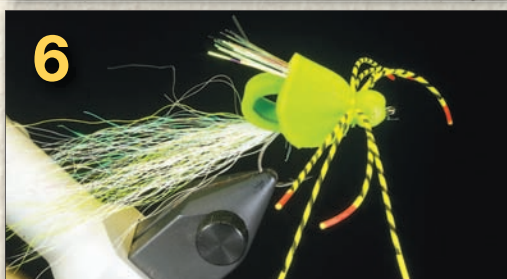
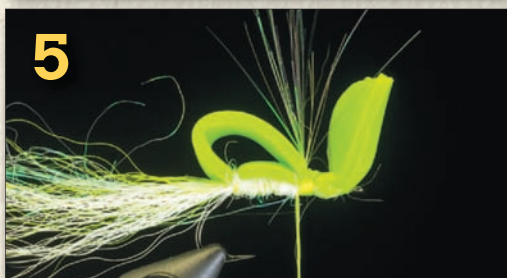
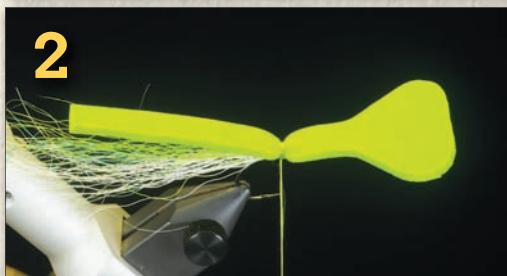
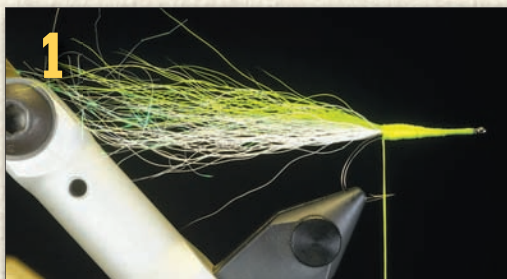
Finally, tie on your dropper with your preferred knot to the other end of your tippet. If the nymph is unweighted, definitely crimp on a size BB or bigger split shot a few inches above the dropper fly to get it down.

Locating Shoalies

"Shoal bass will hang out around large structure, just like a black bass will," says Edmonds, "but I find they really like the moss in the middle of the river." In the Flint and in parts of the Chattahoochee, the native mosses grow into somewhat unusual formations, like two- to three-foot-tall humps that run up- and downriver for several yards on the shoals. Between these humps are canyons of clear water, generally a foot or two wide. Obviously, this is an ideal fish lie, and the shoal bass has evolved to take advantage of it. Shoalies will commonly hold tight against and under these long moss clumps (which can be severely undercut). In order to get a fly to them, you need to run your hopper-dropper system straight down the lane between tussocks.



Georgia's Flint River (above and left) is one arm of the mighty Apalachicola, the other being the Chattahoochee. Both contain indigenous populations of shoal bass. Center photo: A Chattahoochee shoalie.



DAVID KLAUSMEYER

Tying KENT'S STEALTH BOMBER

TEMPLATE



The template shown is actual size for the size 6 Gamakatsu B10S. Adjust according to hook size. Custom cutters for the template are available from River Road Creations (www.riverroadcreations.com), and the Stealth Bomber is also available from Rainy's Flies.

- 1 Start the thread at the eye, and lay down a thread base to the rear of the hook shank. Stop before the bend begins. Tie in a small bunch of white bucktail, then a few strands of Lite Brite, and top with a small bunch of chartreuse bucktail. Do not let the bucktail flare too much.
- 2 Align the foam on the hook shank so that the point at which the foam begins to flare is just behind the eye of the hook. Tie the foam down at the rear of the hook.
- 3 Dub a sparse amount of Lite Brite on the thread and dub about 60 percent of the shank.
- 4 Tie down the foam where the dubbing stops; then dub again almost to the eye. Tie down the foam immediately behind the eye. Make a diagonal wrap to the rear on top of the foam to take the thread back to the center tie-down spot.
- 5 Fold the narrow strip at the rear forward and tie down at the center position. Leave the tab long enough to form the loop as shown. Tie in an underwing of Flashabou about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch long. (I cut the flash about double that length and fold over the thread to tie in.)
- 6 Fold the front piece of foam back and tie down. Tie in two 3-inch strands of medium round rubber legs on each side. Stripe the legs by twisting them, then stretching to about twice their length and running a black Magic Marker lightly down the side. Color the leg tips with a red Magic Marker.

KENT'S STEALTH BOMBER

HOOK: Gamakatsu B10S, size 6.

THREAD: 210 denier, yellow or chartreuse.

TAIL: Chartreuse bucktail, sparkle fiber (Lite Brite, etc), white bucktail.

BODY AND WING: 2 mm foam, cut to shape.

DUBBING: Sparkle fiber.

UNDER-WING: Pearl Flashabou.

LEGS: Yellow or chartreuse medium round rubber, striped with black magic marker and tipped with red marker.

NOTES: Use at least a 1x leader. Tie the fly on with a loop knot. Fish it on a dead drift, with twitches, or with hard chugs. This pattern also effective in solid white and solid black.

If You Go

BILL TIPTON



When To Go

THE FLINT RIVER FISHES BEST BETWEEN MARCH AND JULY. GEORGIA'S RECENT LONG-term drought has had an effect on the health of the fishery, but the Atlanta floods of early fall 2009 probably had an even greater impact. Look for conditions to return to normal by late spring 2010.

Meanwhile, the Chattahoochee River is a year-round fishery, thanks to put-and-take trout stocking during the winter months. The best time of year to target shoal bass in the Hooch is high summer—July, August, and September—but shoalies can certainly be caught in any month of the year (and in the meantime, there are always trout).

Local Resources

FlyfishGA.com — Guide Kent Edmonds's site boasts a number of articles delving into specific shoal-bass tactics on the Flint and other regional rivers.

GeorgiaRiverFishing.com — A popular resource among fly and bait anglers alike; the focus of this Web site is on the Georgia warmwater fisheries south of Atlanta.

NGTO.org — Fly fishers' preferred Georgia Web site; the NGTO (North Georgia Trout Online) forums are a good place to turn for information and updates on local conditions.

FlintRiverOutdoorCenter.com — The Web site for the Flint River Outdoor Center is the best place to start if you plan to canoe or kayak the river (706-647-2633).

Fly Shops

The Fish Hawk — Atlanta, Georgia (thefishhawk.com; 404-237-3473).

Unicoi Outfitters — Blue Ridge and Helen, Georgia (unicoioutfitters.com; 706-878-3083).

Fly Box Outfitters — Kennesaw, Georgia (flyboxoutfitters.com; 678-594-7330).

This makes for relatively short casts and relatively short drifts. Fortunately, there are multitudes of holding lies to try, and the more or less level bottom means these shoal systems can go on for miles, especially on the Flint.

I prefer to fish for shoal bass on a relatively warm day when the water levels are lower and thus the water is clear. Middle Georgia has a great climate for wet wading, so bring some swim trunks and a trusty pair of wading boots or sticky-soled sandals, and just plan to get wet. This also means carrying waterproof fly boxes! I will often swim from tussock to tussock in the river wherever the bottom is briefly too deep to wade.

Starting from the bank, wade into the river and begin identifying the clear spots between moss tussocks. They will be darker, streaky lines on turbid water days, and should be obvious enough if the water is clear. Cast no more than thirty feet upriver to the head of one of these runs; then let the fly work back to you. Be sure to keep control of your slack so it doesn't interfere with your hook set. Alternatively, position yourself on one of the large rocks midshoal, and carefully work all the seams in reach, mending the line to keep a dead drift. If you find yourself fishing a particularly deep or still hole, don't be afraid to give the system a pop or twitch; this can often trigger a quick strike from a fish lurking just out of sight.

Pay attention, because the topwater takes can be quick and explosive! On a good day, you should see double-digit numbers of fish slamming the fly on top, with an equal or greater number of eats on your nymph. While 12 inches is a good average size, shoal bass above five pounds are caught every year.

Away from the moss pods, you may need to switch tactics. Across-and-down drifts are not so effective when the fish are holding in multiple pocket lies, but on gravelly shoals much more common in the Chattahoochee than the Flint, standard trout streamer tactics apply. Shoal bass will eat almost all the streamers trout prefer. Many new Atlanta-area anglers catch a shoal bass as their first fly-caught fish of any kind, usually on olive


or black Woolly Buggers stripped through the tail ends of runs.

Shoal Bass Country

The southernmost Appalachian Piedmont is a surprisingly hilly and beautiful place, with lots of opportunities to float, hunt, and fish. Spewell Bluff State Park on the Flint River is a great starting point for your exploration of this area; shoals extend for several miles in both directions, especially if you don't mind a bit of swimming, while the local wildlife can be pretty astounding. I've seen plenty of turkeys, deer, families of otters playing in the river, and even an elusive bobcat while fishing the Flint in this area.

Local canoe outfitters offer 5-, 10-, and even 20-mile floats with put-ins around or above Spewell Bluff (see sidebar). Further, highway bridge crossings east of Gay, Georgia, on Flat Shoals Road, east of Woodbury on Highway 18, and southwest of Thomaston on Highway 36 offer wading anglers access if you don't mind getting wet.

Meanwhile, the Chattahoochee River in metro Atlanta sports a healthy population of shoalies downstream of Morgan Falls Dam, west of Roswell. For approximately 10 miles from that dam to the Interstate 75 bridge, your chances of catching a rainbow trout, brown trout, shoal bass, or even a striped bass are about equal among all species.

Whether you're a new fly angler looking to test your skills against a worthy opponent in a land not known for trout, or you're a seasoned veteran in search of something new, the shoal bass is an excellent target. Middle Georgia's rivers retain the easygoing access and wild look more commonly seen in bygone years, while the Metro Atlanta fishery is a rare resource for such a major city. Best of all, shoalie fishing is a return to a simpler time, when a handful of trusty flies and a pair of wet shorts were all you needed to catch fish. 

Zach Matthews is the host of the Itinerant Angler Podcast, www.itinerantangler.com.