

Bassing The Arkansas 'Everglades'

ANGLERS AND ALLIGATORS SHARE WATER WITH LUNKER LARGEMOUTHS AT MILLWOOD LAKE



PHOTOS BY JASON SEALOCK • SPECIAL TO THE MORNING NEWS

Mike Siefert, who runs Millwood Lake Guide Service, shows one of the "little" bass caught during an outing at Millwood. The lake is loaded with bass this size, but anglers have a chance to catch fish 10 pounds or better.



A black bass gets ready to snatch a frog lure at Millwood Lake.

By Jason Sealock
SPECIAL TO THE MORNING NEWS

ASHDOWN — Fog swirled across the water's surface as a great blue heron glided effortlessly over the lake. The outboard purred quietly behind the Champion bass boat as we idled out into a sea of standing timber. The sun flashed light behind the horizon, but it would be awhile before daylight would break.

Now in a protective cove, the anticipation of catching a 10-pound bass on Lake Millwood ate away at my patience. Millwood, located just outside of Ashdown in southwest Arkansas, offers Ozark bass anglers a break from the reservoir fishing they have become accustomed to in the central and northern parts of the state.

This 35,000-acre impoundment boasts the best bass fishing in the state. The lake record is 14.5 pounds, and local Arkansas Game and Fish Commission fisheries biologist Les Claybrook reported seeing one that was possibly the next state record bass while doing an electro-fishing sample one night a few years back.

"The bass was trapped under a cypress root and we couldn't get him out of there without injuring the fish," Claybrook said.

Our guide on this outing was Mike Siefert of Millwood Lake Guide Service. (Go to www.millwoodguideservice.com or call (870) 772-6840 to book a trip.)

Mike has been fishing the lake for 30 years and has done more

for the fishery than most other fisherman on the lake. Siefert and the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission identified all the carefully marked boat lanes that meander through the maze of timber.

You won't find another person on the lake who cares more about the fishery and its population of bass.

We started out cranking river channel swings with Rat-L-Traps and Redfin jerkbaits.

"I've caught some giants out here doing this and when they get stacked in here it can be unreal," Siefert said.

After about 30 minutes we moved into a protected pocket near the state park and threw jerkbaits to shallow weeds. It wasn't long until the water boiled at the end of Siefert's line and a chunky 3-pound bass was on his way to the boat.

"Just a little one, but it's a start," he said.

Moving further back into the pocket we hopped snag-proof frogs over lily pad fields. Though we didn't catch many fish, we enjoyed watching the bass blow up on bait while admiring the variety of wildlife wandering the banks and vegetation.

An alligator scurried off the bank and into the water as we idled out of the pocket in search of our next target.

After a short ride through a wandering river channel pass, we found ourselves in a shallow flat with hundreds of cypress trees. The thought that any one of those trees could hold a trophy bass got my heart pumping.

We flipped various soft plastic baits around cypress knees and tree trunk root-wads and caught quality bass with this technique.

Alligators swam around and sunned themselves on the bank as egrets and kingfishers stalked the shallow salad looking for their next meal. For a while, I forgot I was still in Arkansas. In fact it reminded me a bit of home, growing up in the swamps of Florida.

We only fished with Siefert for about 5 hours, but we caught several bass in the 2- to 5-pound range. The scenery was amazing and the thought that your next cast could be a 10-pound bass made the trip that much more exciting.

The fishery at Millwood Lake will amaze you. Even anglers who've lived near the lake their entire lives haven't fished every part of this huge lake.

It's definitely worth hiring a guide your first time on the lake to minimize unproductive water and maximize your chance to catch a lunker.

"March, April and May is the best time to catch a trophy," Siefert said.

To reach Millwood Lake from Northwest Arkansas, follow Interstate 540 to Fort Smith, then travel U.S. 71 to Ashdown.

If you'd rather go interstate the whole way you can take I-40 to Little Rock and then take I-30 to Texarkana.

At any rate, it's worth the time and effort to make the drive to south Arkansas for some of the state's best bass fishing.



A sunken boat adds to the fish cover at Millwood Lake.