

SPORTSMAN

Super Specks

Tips for Neuse River trout

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SUPER SPECKS

The June trout bite on the Neuse River produces the best trophies of the year.

By Mike Marsh

Most fishermen know that the waters of the lower Neuse River produce huge tarpon and red drum during the hottest months of the year, July and August.

The excellent fishing for these two high-profile gamefish is no longer a secret, with many guides and anglers targeting them.

However, the June lull in big-game action, when anglers wonder when and if tarpon and redfish are going to show up, can be filled with another species. Capt. Gary Dubiel of Oriental knows the onset of summer is no time for waiting out other fish.

continued

Bob Bruggeworth has proof that June is a great big-trout month on the Neuse River: a speck he caught on a popping-cork rig.



It's the best time to catch trophy specks. "June is a phenomenal month for specks," said Dubiel, who has operated Speck Fever Guide Service for 15 years. "They bite all along the shoreline, so I catch them at any structure, casting any lure or live bait you can name."

Dubiel said most anglers fish for big specks during the winter. That's a huge mistake, he said, because the ponderous, sow-bellied females don't enter the Neuse River to spawn until June.

"It's the best time to catch lots of really big fish," he said. "A lot of specks will weigh more than five pounds — the size necessary to receive a DMF citation."

Dubiel said a typical day produces a dozen trout between 2½ to six pounds per angler, along with a dozen redfish weighing four to 10 pounds. Some days are much better, a few worse.

"Wind can be a pain," he said. "It can be so rough you can't fish the banks you want, even if you know the fish are there. If the wind's west or northwest, it can blow the water out of the river and drop the water level one to two feet. When that happens, the water can be too shallow where you want to fish."

On calm days, Dubiel fishes from 17-foot Hydra-Sports center console with a bow-mounted trolling motor that allows him to sneak into the shallows. When it's too rough for the small boat, he fishes from his 23-foot Maycraft.

continued



DESTINATION INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE — From Raleigh, take US 264 to Washington, turn south onto US 17 and travel approximately five miles to Chocowinity, then turn south on NC 33 and go 40 miles to Grantsboro. Turn south on NC 55 to Oriental. Turn right onto Hodges St. before crossing the bridge. The ramp is 300 feet away, along Midyette Street at the foot of the bridge.

WHEN TO GO — Specks are in the Neuse River year-round, but big spawning females up the odds for citation-sized specks weighing five pounds or greater around the first of June.

BEST LURES/TECHNIQUES

— Berkley Gulp! Shrimp, D.O.A. shad and soft jerkbaits fished on 1/8th- to ¼-ounce jigheads or on popping-cork rigs. A brief topwater bite occurs at dawn, when MirrOlure Top Dogs come into play. Excellent diving lures include X-Raps and lipped MirrOlures. Redfish Magic spinnerbaits work well when the water is very dark. Live mullet fished on float rigs or bottom rigs with circle hooks also work well. Use white or silver colors for clear water, dark colors like root beer or new penny in darker water.

FISHING INFO/GUIDES — Capt. Gary Dubiel, Speck Fever Guide Service, 252-249-1520; Capt. George Beckwith Jr., Down East Guide Service, 252-671-3474. Also, see GUIDES & CHARTERS in classifieds.

ACCOMMODATIONS — Oriental Marina Inn, 103 Wall St., Oriental, NC 28571, 252-249-1818.

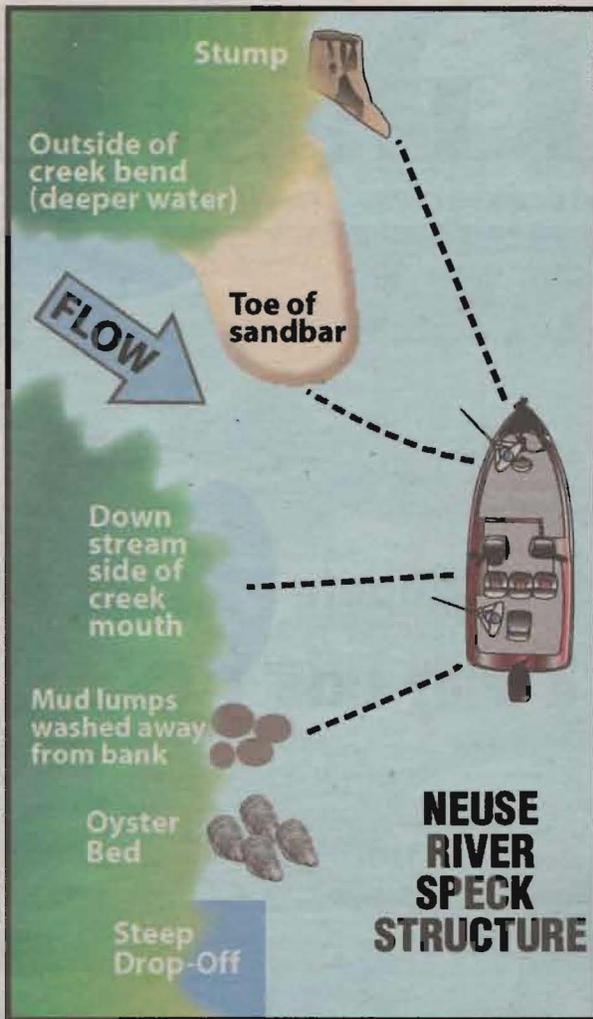
MAPS — Sealake Fishing Guides, 800-411-0185, www.thegoodspots.com; GMCO Chartbook of North Carolina, 888-420-6277 www.gmco.com



Capt. Gary Dubiel said that early summer is prime time to take big speckled trout in the lower Neuse River.

MIKE MARSH

A lot of nice speckled trout are caught in relatively open water in the lower Neuse River; savvy fishermen recognize subtle fish-holding objects such as stumps, mud lumps and sharp drops.



Casting a soft-plastic lure rigged on a jighead, Dubiel uses light spinning tackle to target marsh-grass mud lumps that have been separated from the bank by erosion. He also casts to oyster beds, stumps, sandbars, creek mouths and steep drop-offs.

"People familiar with other areas don't understand Neuse River speck fishing," he said. "The water is so shallow and the shoreline so uniform, they don't know where to begin. But if you study the river long enough, you will see the subtle structure that attracts big specks."

"Other people target bridges and jetties or massive oyster beds they can see. Here, the water is no more than four or five feet deep, and there are no big structure areas. Any stump or mud lump could hold a fish, or a concentration of fish. You won't know until you cast."

Dubiel said specks feed on baitfish in June, especially menhaden. Finding menhaden flipping in a creek mouth, no matter how small the creek, means specks are in the area.

"Sometimes there's lots of bait," he said. "Sometimes there's even too much bait. If there are too many baitfish in the water, I find my specks away from the baitfish schools. I think specks feeding inside baitfish schools have so much to eat they don't strike lures, but there are always other specks somewhere nearby along the shoreline."

Dubiel plans summer-trip departures for early in the day. It beats the heat and sometimes the wind, and it's the best time to sight-fish for specks.

"If you can get there before the sun comes up, you'll see specks blowing up menhaden schools," he said. "That's the time to cast topwater lures. I like the MirrOlure Top Dog best for surface fishing. But once the sun comes up, I switch to a jig with a soft plastic or a live bait. I like scented soft plastics because a speck can find them by sight or scent. If I fish them on a popping cork rig, it adds sound to the attracting power."

Mullet is Dubiel's preferred live bait, although menhaden will do. He fishes live minnows on a float rig or a Carolina rig with a small egg weight. He uses a 3/0

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NEUSE DROPOFFS ARE STEEP, NOT DEEP

Most anglers arriving from inland to fish inlets, the ICW and other coastal rivers that have dredged navigation channels have no concept of what Dubiel and other Neuse River guides mean when they refer to a "steep dropoff."

The river is very shallow, and the slope from the bank is long and gradual in most places.

However, there are sheer drops along the bank or out just a few feet. They are seldom more than one or two feet in elevation, but they can be a bit deeper. And that's where the specks live.

Indications of steep drops are grass lines that end abruptly, dark organic material jutting an inch to a foot above the water at the edge of the shoreline, and dark material visible under the water. Sand is light colored, and doesn't hold a vertical orientation like clay or organic soils that include grass stems and roots.

circle hook when fishing any live bait.

"We have so many small red drum and so many inexperienced anglers who wait too long to set the hook that using circles hooks is best," he said. "You don't want to deep-hook a red drum that's too small or too large to keep, or after you've already caught your one slot fish for the day."

When Dubiel fishes a jig, he gives it a much harder twitch than most anglers. He lets it fall to the bottom, then twitches it upward. The strike usually comes as the lure is falling.



Capt. Gary Dubiel fishes a marsh bank with a step drop in front — a classic place to find specks during the summer.

continued

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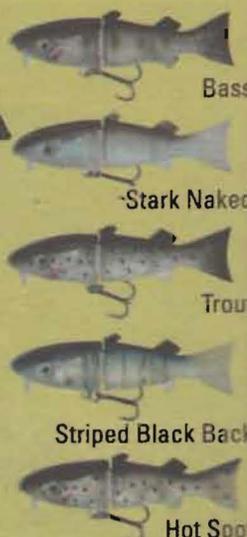
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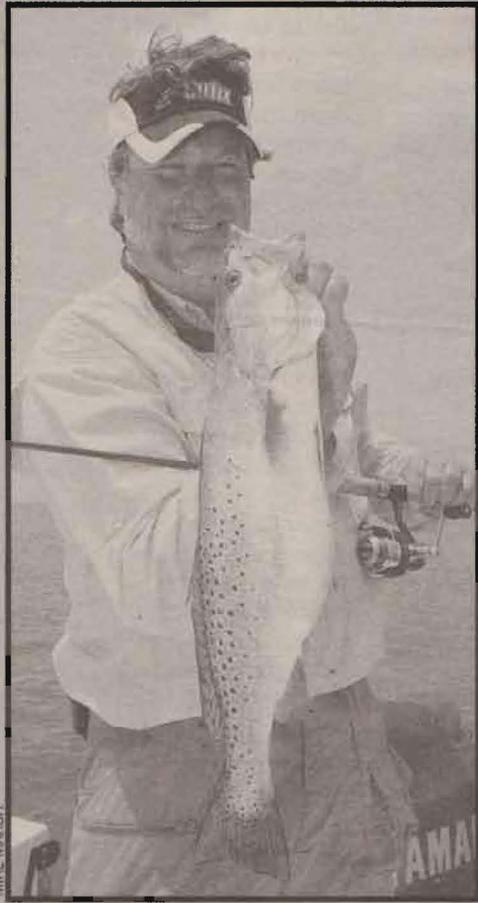
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WHY ARE JUNE TROUT JUMBOS?

Beth Burns, a biologist for the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries who is the spotted seatrout expert, said there's a biological reason why June specks are so heavy.

"Speckled trout spawn continually from May through October," said Burns, who works out of the NCDMF's Manteo office. "But the peak of the spawn occurs the first week of June. It's a good time to catch a citation speck because of the weight of the eggs. We (examine) fish throughout the season. Speckled trout spawn out, then rebuild their material and spawn again. Bigger fish tend to spawn more frequently than smaller fish.

"But the first spawn produces the most eggs and therefore, the heaviest female fish."

Capt. Gary Dubiel shows off a fat trout — fat because it's full of eggs and ready to spawn.

"The fish are usually going to be in the bottom third of the water column," he said. "If you don't keep your lure inside that strike zone all the time during the retrieve, you're missing out on fishing time and reducing the number of fish you're catching. The more time you keep it in that zone, the more time your lure is in front of a speck's nose. A hard twitch makes it look like a wounded menhaden, and he won't be able to turn it down."

Bob Bruggeworth lives in Fairfield Harbour, a development on the Neuse River near New Bern. He founded the Fairfield Harbour Fishing Club after moving to the area in 1992 and is a dedicated trout fisherman.

FERTILE FISH

An adult, female speckled trout can produce between three million and 20 million eggs a year.

A 2-pound female can spawn eight times in one season. Females mature by age one at 12 inches in length. A citation fish is typically a female aged two to five years.

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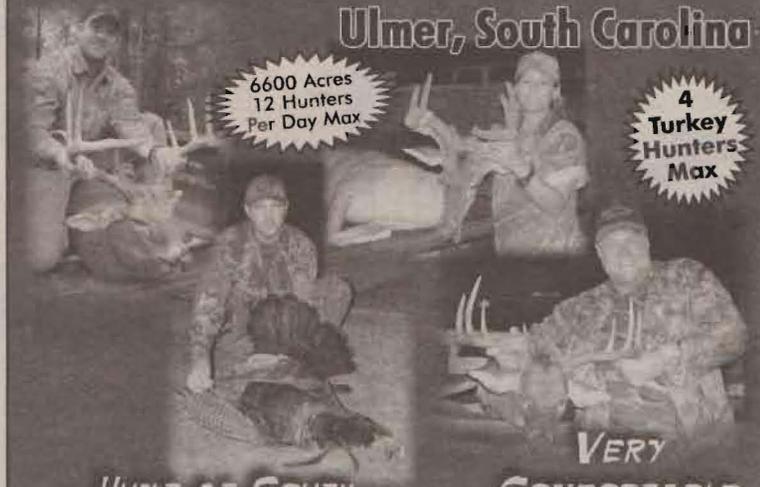
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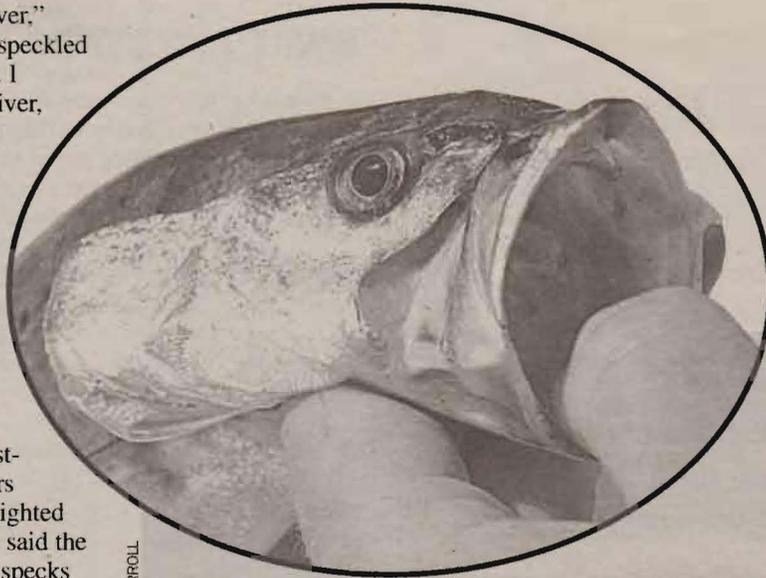
"I fish all along the river," Bruggeworth said. "The speckled trout fishing is unrivaled. I catch trout in the lower river, but I also fish around the new US 17/70 Bridge across the Trent River. I also fish right inside our harbor. A good place to fish is where Spring Creek enters the harbor. There are bulkheads and piers in the harbor that hold fish."

Bruggeworth likes casting ready-rolls. He prefers Storm lures that have weighted hooks molded inside. He said the holographic colors drive specks wild.

"They're so realistic, a fish can't turn them down," he said. "The trick is to get it in front of the fish. That means making lots of casts to cover lots of water."

Fishing with Dubiel one day, Bruggeworth wasn't having any

continued



BRIAN CARROLL

Unless they are visibly injured, most speckled trout can be released alive if handled carefully.

Some fishermen catch dozens of specks on a single trip, not paying attention to how they handle fish before release.

It may be a good idea when mining a mother lode of specks to keep fish that are injured the most and release fish suffering minimal hook wounds and stress.

Biologists calculate a widely-varying mortality for released specks, with higher mortalities in lower salinity waters. The average mortality for hook-and-line angling releases is 9.8 percent.

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WHAT'S IN STORE FOR SPECKS?

Biologist Beth Burns said that despite raving reports of spectacular speckled trout fishing, the stock biomass is plummeting. Increased restrictions may be in store.

"We will be changing the assessment from viable," she said. "In the past, the assessment was based on landings, but now it's a true stock assessment. As it appears now, the assessment will be changed to overfished, with overfishing occurring. We're hoping after the last couple of seasons are factored in that we're not still seeing that. But while the commercial catch has been falling, the recreational catch has been skyrocketing."

If the stock assessment shows a problem, options include decreasing the recreational bag limit and increasing the recreational size limit. There is no commercial quota for speckled trout, but it is not a highly commercialized fish.

BRIAN CARROLL



Biologists say speckled trout are overfished in North Carolina and expect to see more strict size and creel limits in the future.

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*"To a speck,
a popping cork
sounds like
a ringing
dinner bell."
— Gary Dubiel*



MIKE MARSH

A float rig can be used equally well with live bait or artificials, especially scented soft-plastic baits.

luck, so Dubiel tied on a popping-cork rig with a Berkley Gulp! shrimp on a jighead about two feet below the float.

"Cast it, then pop the float with a hard jerk of the rod," Dubiel said. "Then let the lure fall for a count of four or five before popping it again. Most fishermen don't let the lure fall long enough. The idea is to make it resemble a shrimp. They flip up from the bottom then fall motionless back down. A speck will strike the lure as it falls most of the time, but they also can strike as it hits the water, or while it is just sitting there bobbing beneath the float."

The popping cork rig is deadly on specks during hot weather, Dubiel said. The extra noise can bring in fish from quite a long distance.

"The sound of the beads striking the float are meant to sound like a shrimp flipping in the water," he said. "If you float it over a sandbar or oyster bed, specks are going to come from the bottom and as far as 50 feet away to investigate that sound. To a speck, a popping cork sounds like a ringing dinner bell." →

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