

Follow the Birds

By Tom Tripi and Jeff Sympson

Here in south Louisiana following the birds means one thing, following the gulls, terns, and other marine related birds that follow school fish in brackish water. Of course if you follow the birds and school fish, you will soon be into predator fish such as redfish, speckled trout (spotted weak fish), blues, etc. These are favorite species in southeast Louisiana and the gulf coast. If you pursue brackish or salt water fishing, following the birds will result in a good catch. But what about freshwater fishing? Do birds eat fresh water fish, or chase schools of small or immature species? Of course they do. However in my experience I've seldom seen birds pursue a school of prey fish that in turn are followed by larger species of fish. I've seen big Snowy White Egrets work shorelines and bayou edges catching anything that moves, mostly crawfish small sunfish, frogs, etc. And of course the bald eagles work big schools of salmon and trout in Alaska and the Northwest. However, in very few cases in Louisiana would the presence of fresh water shore birds indicate that there were fish in the area, equating to the adage "Lets follow the birds today".

Enter a unique fishery, the Bonnet Carre Spillway in Southeast Louisiana. The Bonnet Carre is a freshwater diversion structure consisting of a two mile wide by six mile wide strip of land that connects the Mississippi River with Lake Pontchartrain, just north of New Orleans. The river floods the Spillway once a year with spring run-off from melting snow and rain up north. After that, things settle down, the Spillway dries out, creating an exceptional fresh and brackish (sometimes almost marine) fishery in the many ponds and canals that were created during construction of the floodway in the 1930's. The two primary diversion canals are approximately three miles long, 300 feet wide and 20 – 50 feet deep.

A typical stretch along
of one of the primary
diversion canals in the
Bonnet Carre Spillway



The Spillway's population of predator fish is constantly replenished by flood water from the Mississippi, usually bass and small strippers. Redfish and speckled

trout and other marine species are replenished via canals that enter from the Lake. All predator species have copious prey fish to sustain them including huge year round populations of sunfish, mullet, ladyfish, and shad. My guide, Jeff Sympson and I have been fishing the Spillway together for over ten years, and I've been fishing it for over forty years. As an avid bird watcher and photographer, I have always kept track of what the birds are doing while I fished. Until this year, birds and fish did not relate to each other, at least from a fisherman's point of view, in the Spillway. Now enter the Barred Owl.



The Barred Owl is one of the largest, and most common species of owls in southeast Louisiana. They grow to 20" high, and live just about anywhere there are rabbits, mice, snakes, frogs, etc. to sustain their diet. Oh, did I mention they love fish and blue crabs? It seems that a local population of Barred Owls that lives along one of the main Bonnet Carre canals are feasting on fish, including bass and sunfish, and large crabs that live in the shallows of the canal. These canals have a very narrow and shallow shoreline before the water depth drops off to over 20 feet. These narrow shorelines support huge populations of bass, redfish speckled trout, etc. They

live and in around the stumps and dead falls that make up the entire shoreline these canal and the shoreline of the Lake. A unique physical aspect of the canal shoreline is how clear the water is, even at depths of up to four feet. (pretty unique in this area of Louisiana.) Most of the canal's shoreline bottom consists of a hard packed, fine brown river sand. If not for the deadfalls and stumps, one could wade the entire three mile shoreline with a fly rod, "fishing the flats" so to speak. We have always noted that there was a large population of owls in this area, as one can hear their calls at sunrise. Early this year we were fly fishing the flats for bass around 8:30 am, when we saw a huge barred owl swoop down from an overhanging tree limb into the water and snatch a full size blue crab. He stood in the three inch deep water for a few seconds with his claw on the crab, then flew back to his limb and started to devour the crab.

We sat in awe watching this huge bird tear apart the crab, he was oblivious to our being only 30 feet away in a boat. Of course neither one of us thought to get a camera out and shoot a few photographs.



That event opened our eyes to a phenomenon that we probably never would have paid attention to. A particular stretch of canal shoreline in the Spillway appears to harbor a substantial population of “fishing” Barred Owls. And, “upon further review”, it appears that there is a definite relationship between owl population, the area they feed in, and the populations of bass and large sunfish. It’s not a coincidence that when we fished further away from the birds, our catch

generally begins to fall off. An unscientific investigation of the owl population revealed a few interesting facts. These owls are fearless, one can approach to as near as 25 feet without spooking the birds. But go a half mile down the canal and the birds become very cautious, 30 yards might be a close approach. There appears to be about two dozen individuals that specialize in fishing in this area. They group in twos or threes, all the while hooting and whistling to each other; they are a very vocal bunch.



So, what about the fishing? Well, fly fishing in our “private stretch” is alive and well. The bass are very cooperative as are the robust sunfish. We currently use small deer hair poppers on a 10’ leader; a light weight 8 or 9 foot rod with DT4 or 5 line is all that’s required. 30 to 40 foot casts are the norm, and fishing the “*shallows for shadows*” is the trick. By fishing the *shallows for shadows*, I mean we fish surface flies in two to three feet of water over dark colored structure on the sandy bottom. It’s like fly fishing for brown trout in mountain streams, one can almost pick the rock structure that trout hide behind in a current. The same goes here, underwater hollowed out stumps, crossed logs or large logs with a “v” are

almost guaranteed to hold a dominate bass, and a few assorted large sunfish. One has to remember that these are quiet, shallow waters, a soft delicate presentation is almost mandatory, as is a slow steady retrieve. Our favorite fly sizes are between 4 and 8 for the poppers and when we switch to dry flies, namely a Madam X or a similar crossed legged dry fly, it's a 10 or 12. When presented and fished properly the Madam X is a deadly fly in the Spillway. In fact, we only use it when all else fails. Favorite popper colors change with the seasons, but currently a purple / yellow body with rubber legs is very effective as is an olive and black muddler with red dots on its wing.



Bonnet Carre Favorites



**A Mature Barred Owl
Surveying Us!**



An Immature Barred Owl Surveying the Flats