

## Hawgin' On The St. Johns

*The stretch of the big river around Lake Woodruff in west Volusia County provides a glimpse of old Florida. But it also offers the chance to battle with some lunker largemouths! (October 2007)*

By Polly Dean

Defining the western boundary of Volusia County, the mighty St. Johns River is only minutes away. But it's a world apart from the popular destination of Daytona Beach, where hordes of spring-breakers, bikers and NASCAR fans invade the warm sandy beaches. The river's corridor with its rich vistas and laid-back lifestyle, reminds us that old Florida still prevails.

For decades, the river's abundance of freshwater fish -- first and foremost, the largemouth bass -- has attracted anglers to the area. Today's fishermen are still greeted by the river's fertile waters and lush banks where the fishing camps of yesteryear still dot its shoreline.

Most significantly, lunker bass still thrive in great numbers in the St. Johns and its feeder creeks. Today's angler is just as likely to boat a "hawg" as those who fished the river's dark waters years ago.

This I learned in a very short time!

Nicknamed "Florida's First Highway," the St. Johns is Florida's longest river. Its 310 miles meander north from the vicinity of Cape Canaveral in the south northward to Jacksonville. The St. Johns is one of only three major rivers in the United States that flows from south to north.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the river was a popular waterway for vacationers from the north, who traveled on steamboats to admire its beauty. Its historic significance earned it the distinction in 1997 of being named by President Clinton as the only American Heritage River in Florida.

### BASS FISHING

September and October are the start of the prime time for targeting big largemouths on the St. Johns, and the season for hooking into big bass continues into March. During these prime months, fishing live bait is the method of choice for many.

Brothers Rick and Ron Rawlins are experts at catching these lunkers and have mastered the techniques for catching the big ones. Both men guide anglers on the St. Johns River and its surrounding waters and put their clients on big fish!

During my first visit fishing with the Rawlins brothers, I succeeded in landing an 8 1/2-pounder! Along with catching that big bass, I learned their method of using live bait and was surprised to learn that it can be a challenging -- but very fun -- way to catch the hawgs!

The Rawlins brothers own and manage Highlands Park Fish Camp, a place that reminds us of what old Florida was like, decades ago. It still holds the same appeal to returning visitors today. Anglers who visited the camp as children now bring



*Capt. Rick Rawlins hoists the 8 1/2-pound largemouth that the author pulled from beneath the pennywort. The number of aggressive bowfins encountered in these waters can become a nuisance -- but they do put up a fight.*

Photo by Polly Dean.

their families to enjoy the laid-back charm, as well as to enjoy the quality freshwater fishing that the area still offers.

The Rawlins family has owned the property for 45 years, and Ron and Rick have guided anglers on the creeks and oxbows of the St. Johns River, as well as the main channel, for all but eight of those years. The brothers' parents acquired the property, after falling in love with it while vacationing at the camp themselves.

The fish camp lies just south of Lake Woodruff, on the outskirts of the town of DeLeon Springs and 4 1/2 miles northwest of Deland, home to Stetson University.

Highland Park sits on the Dead Norris River, an old channel of the St. Johns, and is bordered by the Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge contains 20,000 acres of undeveloped land contributing to the unspoiled beauty of the area.

The St. Johns River, along with its many creeks, is truly scenic and unique in its appearance. As we floated along its waters, I notice that it really has no bank. The edges are lush and thickly lined with cabbage palms, oaks, and cypresses that are mirrored by the water's dark surface. Scores of fallen trees with their expansive, but shallow root systems dot the river's edge.

Wildlife is abundant. The vast diversity of bird life provided a feast for our eyes and ears. Alligators appeared in greater numbers than I would have imagined! Large gators and their young lay sunning on the horizontal trunks of downed trees. After seeing a number of the toothy reptiles, I decided not to risk a dip in these waters!

Vast beds of lily pads and pennywort cover much of the water's edges and creek mouths. Around these was where the largemouths take cover and where we tossed our live bait.

Both the Rawlins brothers prefer fishing the floating masses of pennywort to the lily pads. The pennyworts provide denser cover, and their stalks usually don't extend down to the riverbed. Lily pads, on the other hand, have long, strong stalks that are just right for hanging up your line.

The brothers use shiners for luring the big bass. The 6- to 8-inch wild river shiners cost about a buck apiece, but are worth the investment. The Rawlins use live bait for 95 percent of their fishing in the fall and winter months. If the fishing gets particularly good in the warmer spring or summer months, they may throw an artificial lure.



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Like many folks who have not used live bait, we found that the interesting technique the Rawlins' brothers demonstrated takes a little getting used to. But we were rewarded with a number of good-sized fish and a good time.

We used stout bait-casting rods with 20-pound-test line, with the hook placed approximately 2 to 2 1/2 feet beneath a bobber. For a more natural nose-down swimming action, we hooked the shiners through the lips. The trick was to cast the bait to the edge of the pennywort and hope the shiner swam along hugging the edge, or even going under the cover.

We were told to keep our rod tips up and keep plenty of slack in the line. Rick Rawlins even suggested keeping the bail open until the bait was taken and we were ready to set the hook.

If the shiner didn't cooperate and headed away from the weed cover, we reeled up and recast. The idea was to keep the bait near or under the floating cover where the bass are.

Sometimes, giving the rod tip a jerk would get a lethargic shiner on the move again.

As we left our lines slack, we kept an eye on our floats, waiting for them to disappear under the surface. Some nervous movement of the float -- or even the shiner skipping to the surface to escape a predator -- would usually precede the bobber going under.

When the float did get pulled down, it was hard to resist the instinct to immediately pull back and set the hook. But instead, the procedure is to line up the rod with the submerged bait while slowly reeling in the slack line, thus not alarming what is on the other end. As you reel in the excess line, lower the rod tip towards the spot where the line disappears under the surface -- and get ready to pull up hard and set the hook!

When we did that, a number of the big fish we caught were unfortunately not largemouth bass. We hooked plenty of bowfin -- or mudfish, as they are referred to locally. The mudfish prefer much the same habitat as the big bass and, even though they have some size to them, they can be a bit of a nuisance.

After hooking a few mudfish, you'll detect some differences in their method of taking the bait. But since these aren't a reliable way to tell what you have on the end of your line, Rick and Ron both said to assume that every bite is a big bass!

Largemouths grab a shiner and turn the bait to swallow it headfirst. That generally causes the float to go straight down sharply. If the fish throws the bait and it has scales stripped from its sides, that's a good indicator that a bass had hold of it.

Bowfins grab and hold the bait in their mouth horizontally while swimming with it. If you see your float "submarining" or cruising just under the surface with a steady movement, a mudfish likely has hold of it.

And more times than not, even after you set the hook and fight the fish to the boat, a mudfish will get off. They just hold the bait sideways in their mouths, refusing to let it go. That makes them more difficult to hook. Bite marks across the shiner's side indicate that a mudfish had hold of it. But again, the Rawlins said they have been fooled. The best method is to set the hook as if it were a hawg largemouth.

If the mudfish dominate the bite at one location, then move on to another spot. There are too many big largemouths out there to waste time -- or shiners -- on mudfish.

Masses of pennywort floating in creek mouths are particularly good places to target the bass. Often the creek is so congested with pennywort or lily pads that it's hard to tell that there is a creek there.

We also fished a few of the "dead rivers," including Hontoon Dead River. These dead-end channels were once part of the main channel of the St. Johns. During World War II, the river was straightened by dredging through its twists and turns, creating a number of those dead-end rivers.

Ron Rawlins mentioned to us that stingrays also thrive in the St. Johns River, which is highly unusual due to the fact that they are saltwater creatures. In fact, the St. Johns is the only body of water where the Atlantic stingray actually reproduces and completes its life cycle in a freshwater environment! But they are almost impossible to see in the dark water, except in the clearer water near springs, where they can sometimes be spotted in great numbers.

As mentioned earlier, the panorama of plant and wildlife along the stream is a real bonus to the fishing. This is truly a birder's paradise! Those who know me are aware that I'm as hardcore an angler as any who suffer from the addiction. I have a hard time being anywhere near water without a rod in hand. I rarely cross a bridge without peering at the flow below.



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But the waters and surrounding environs of the St. Johns River offer such a bounty of wildlife that I found myself wanting to come back -- maybe even leaving my rod at home -- just to view the multitude of birds that inhabit the shore and trees along the water's edge. The many species of birds include waterfowl, waders and shorebirds. We saw bald eagles -- one even swooped down just alongside our boat to snatch a catfish from just below the surface.

We thought that odd, since catfish are generally not topwater fish. But this one made the mistake of getting too shallow and provided us quite a sight. We spotted kingfishers, wood storks, herons -- great blues, little blues and even a night heron. Ron Rawlins was especially knowledgeable in identifying the many varieties. (And for those tired of reeling in the big ones, he does offer birding tours.)

If you're especially lucky, you may even see a manatee or two!

### FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Highlands Park Fish Camp has a tackle shop with trophy room, marina, boat rentals and guide services. They also have cabins and campsites available for rent.

Along with Captains Rick and Ron Rawlins, Capt. James Hillman is available to guide anglers. For more information, call 1-800-525-3477. Or you can visit their Web site at [www.hpfishcamp.com](http://www.hpfishcamp.com).

Another option for your visit to old Florida and the days of "mom-and-pop" motels can be found at the newly renovated and decorated Spring Waters Inn in DeLeon Springs. Just minutes from Highland Park Fish Camp, it is located at 4851 North Highway 17, DeLeon Springs, FL 31320.

For information or reservations, call (386) 985-5455.

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