

CATCHING A CHATTAHOOCHEE GRAND SLAM

by Bill Vanderford

Many years ago when I was first discovering the diverse beauty and fabulous fishing at Lake Lanier, I tried to venture beyond the lake up into the wild, fast waters of the Chattahoochee River. Those who have attempted such a journey with a normal boat know how difficult the trip can be once the shallow water warning signs have been passed above Clarks Bridge. From there up, underwater obstructions, rocks, and extremely shallow water areas become a major problem. Despite the obstacles, I made as far as Lula Bridge before giving up with a fiberglass boat that sat too deep in the water.

However, the dream of fishing the “Hooch” above the lake never left my mind, so when former Atlanta Falcon, Tom Pridemore, gave me a small canoe-like boat, I acquired a tiny 9.9 horsepower motor and gave the river another try. That time, I put in at Lula and went north on the Chattahoochee, and was able to pick my way slowly up the current until I came to a rocky rapid about a mile above Belton Bridge. I then tied the small boat to a tree and began wading and fishing that section of the river as though it were a trout stream. I used some of the small Swirleybird spinners that I had made, and my results were fantastic! I caught largemouth bass, spotted bass, and a strange-looking bass that had vertical bars on its side like that of a smallmouth bass, but the peculiar bass was green rather than bronze like the smallmouth. I didn’t know it at the time, but I had just caught my first “Chattahoochee Grand Slam,” which consists of a largemouth, spotted, and the rare shoal bass. The shoal bass is unique to Georgia rivers and streams that have fast-moving water, and at that time was a very rare member of the black bass family.

I was so intrigued by the Chattahoochee River above Lake Lanier that eventually I designed and had a special jet boat built so that I could follow my dream. The finished product is an 18-foot aluminum boat with an 82-inch beam made of 1/8th inch-thick, welded aluminum. It has a double hull with two 4-inch aluminum beams welded the length of the boat on the inside, and four 2-inch beams or runners welded on the outside. In other words, the boat is built like a Sherman tank, but it is considerably lighter. Every compartment and the center console are fabricated from the same top quality aluminum and covered with a high-grade outdoor carpet. Despite the obvious strength of the boat, it has enough internal flotation in sealed compartments to keep it afloat if a puncture occurs and it fills with water. The design is a masterpiece of engineering, and the welding throughout is like artwork.

The power for this ultimate shallow water boat comes from an 80 horsepower, jet outboard, which when trimmed all the way down is still three inches above the bottom of the boat. This configuration is possible because of the Ventura effect of the tunnel that forces water up to the intake on the bottom of the motor faster than water is actually passing the outer sides of the boat. Therefore, it is impossible for the foot of the motor to ever come into contact with rocks or other unseen debris. The overall width and length of the boat allows it to float easily in less than six inches of water with three people and all their equipment aboard, and when running on a plane, it easily glides over obstacles that are less than an inch below the bottom. This extremely shallow draft and freedom of

movement, without fear of destruction, has allowed me and my clients to enjoy beauty that we would have never imagined in the past, and a chance to catch a “Chattahoochee Grand Slam” on every trip!

Though my special jet boat is primarily used for fishing the fast, shallow waters of the upper “Hooch”, many other trips now consist of couples just wanting to enjoy a romantic day of seclusion with the gorgeous scenery, see numerous species of wildlife, and thrill to the way the boat glides over the fast water. For a parent and child, the upper Chattahoochee River is nature’s classroom, complete with waterfowl, deer, reptiles, birds, geology, and never ending flora. These trips up into the solitude of the Chattahoochee River begin with wild anticipation of communing with a continuously changing kaleidoscope of natural beauty!

Bill Vanderford has won numerous awards for his writing and photography, and has been inducted into the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame as a Legendary Guide. He can be reached at 770-289-1543, JFish51@aol.com, or at his web site: www.lanierfishing.com