



BASTION OF THE Bronzebacks

Susan L. Ebert

The gin-clear waters of Texas' Blanco River beckon smallmouth bass aficionados from across the nation.

“It’s more like sight-casting

for bonefish in Key West than it is fishing for smallies,” Virginian Tom Ehrhard tells me via e-mail when I ask him what lured him to Texas’ Blanco River.

I’ve asked several of the regular posters at www.riversmallies.com what out-of-staters think about the Blanco’s bronzeback bastion.

Living in nearby Austin, I’ve fished this pretty little jewel of a river numerous times, often targeting Rio Grande perch (blue cichlid) or the countless dazzling bream such as bluegills, longears, redbreasts and green perch that proliferate here.

But this time, I tell Kelly Watson of Texas River Bass, I want to target smallmouth bass.

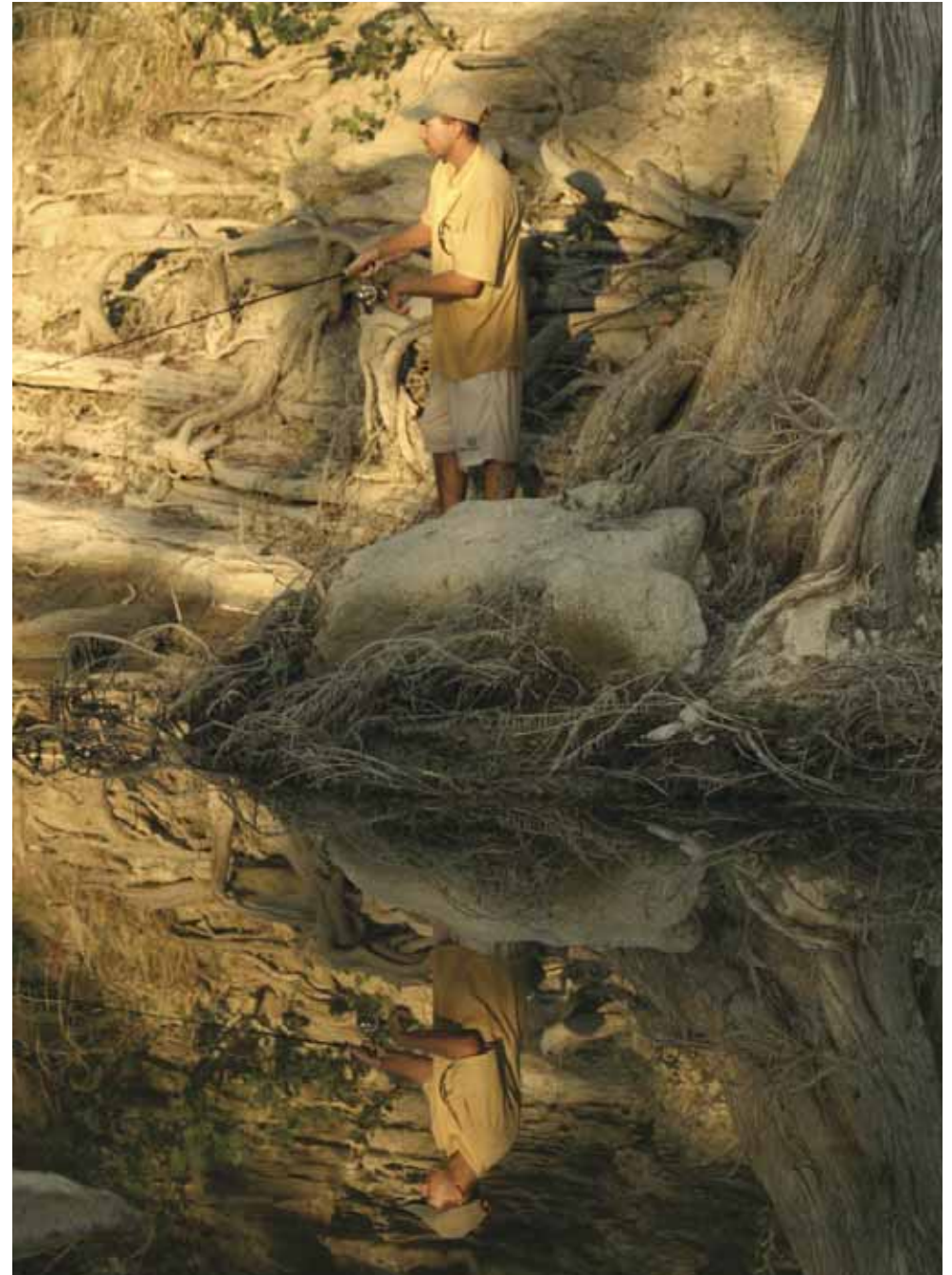
Watson chuckles. “About a third of my clients come from out-of-state,” he says, “mostly Ohio,

Pennsylvania, New York, Virginia and West Virginia. I’m always surprised so many Texans haven’t discovered what’s right in their own backyards.”

Little River, Big Smallies

The Blanco is a modest river by any account. It flows a mere 80 miles from its source in Texas’ upper Hill Country to its confluence with the San Marcos River between Austin and San Antonio.

But what the Blanco lacks in length and flow, it more than makes up for with eye-popping scenery. Limestone ledges crest above cypress trees edging





The cypress-rimmed, clear-flowing Blanco is so secluded you'll rarely see another person on the river.

crystal-clear waters. Rapids rush over rocks before gathering in deep, blue-green pools that hold healthy populations of small-mouth and Guadalupe bass, including many smallie/Guad hybrids exceeding 18 inches.

I meet Watson at his Blanco River hideaway near Kyle, from which he operates Texas River Bass, catering to light-tackle anglers seeking sight-casting thrills on the Blanco, Llano and other Hill Country rivers.

Today, we'll launch just below Watson's house. As public access to this secluded river is limited, and private land ownership can often include the riverbed, not just the riverbanks as is the norm in most of Texas, a guide is darn-near essential.

As Watson and Hugh Fadal, who often guides with him, unload the canoes, my partner spots the day's first fish, three cruising bruisers whose green, gold and tan camouflage blends with the rocks below. I see their shadows on the rocks beneath them; they seem suspended in air, not water, as if a study by surrealist René Magritte has come to life.

He sightcasts to the first of the trio, which charges the bait, gills

flaring, and immediately inhales the quarter-ounce Road Runner curly-tailed jig. The morning

hunt is on.

We are floating on glass, the canoe's shadow 30 feet down

If You Go:

■ **Cabela's:** The 185,000-square-foot extravaganza in Buda, Texas, just off I-35, is a 15-minute drive from Texas River Bass in Kyle. Before you go, check the listings of in-store events and seminars you might wish to attend by visiting www.cabelas.com and clicking on "retail stores," then on the red and yellow dot indicating Buda, or call (512) 295-1100.

■ **The Inn Above Onion Creek:** Situated on 100 pristine acres just north of Kyle on Highway 150, this commanding lodge is a great staging point for your angling adventures or a destination in itself. Room rates include both breakfast and supper, prepared with imagination and flair by the Inn's chef, Matthew Buchanan, with seasonal ingredients from the Inn's own gardens. The suites, named for local legends and deliciously appointed, sport in-room whirlpools, entertainment centers and luxuriously mounded feather mattresses and comforters. Visit www.innaboveonioncreek.com or call (800) 579-7686.

■ **The Inn at Creekside:** Nearby in Wimberley, this lush, well-tended compound on four acres hugs 800 shady feet along Cypress Creek and is a short stroll away from the picturesque village of Wimberley. Tasteful cabins feature in-room whirlpools, wood stoves, ceiling fans and shady porches. Excellent fishing for bream and Rio Grande perch is a step from your cabin. Plan to sample the extravagant Sunday brunch, with such delights as handmade croissants, strawberry-filled blintzes, eggs Benedict, honeyed ham, garlic cheese grits and more. Visit www.acountryinn.com or call (512) 847.8922.

■ **Texas River Bass:** Expert fly-and-light-tackle guide Kelly Watson attracts bronzeback buffs from across the nation to his home Hill Country waters, as well as guiding riverbed dove and duck hunts. Watson offers one- and two-day guided trips, with the bigger fish being found on the longer, less-fished sections. Visit www.texasriverbass.com or call (512) 590-4458.

tracking our passage. Every fish within 40 yards is clearly visible, from tiny forage fish to a spotted gar to the turquoise-flecked Rio Grande perch, here at the northernmost edge of their tropical range.

Pausing near the base of a gargantuan cypress, Watson flings a lead-eyed woolly bugger fly into the shaded green pool. "I like to use a heavy leader, maybe 15 pound, and tie directly to it, no tippet," he said. "Unlike trout, bass have hard mouths. Set the hook extremely hard – like this!" He laughs as a smallie strikes his fly.

"Some of the best fishing on the Blanco is in late spring, like today," Watson continues, "even when the water temperature can run into the 80-degree range. The smallmouth/Guadalupe hybrids here act more like Guadalupe bass, and get excited by the warmer water." He's no doubt



Guide Kelly Watson, fishing medium-weight spinning tackle, prepares to bring another bronzeback to hand.

right, as strike after strike proves his point.

The Guad Father

Texas' Guadalupe bass, native only to the Texas Hill Country, is the patriarch of this bloodline. Smallmouth bass, nonnative to Texas, were introduced into the Blanco by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, which

stocked 123,000 smallies in 1977 and an additional 4,558 in 1980.

"Biologists at that time were unaware that the Guadalupe bass and smallmouths would hybridize," said Gary Garrett, a TPWD fisheries biologist, "as neither Guadalupes nor smallmouths interbreed with northern largemouth bass, with which they share waters."



This mottled-green-and-gold beauty with a tiger-striped face is a prime example of the dazzling pattern variations found in the Blanco.

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But by the mid-1980s, biologists concluded the two species were intermingling and their offspring were reproducing, with the hybrids rapidly replacing pure-strain Guadalupes in the rivers that had been stocked.

Stocking of smallmouth bass came to a screeching halt, and a move is now under way to stock native Guadalupe bass instead, with 56,360 fingerlings released into the Blanco in 1994, an additional 23,654 in 1995, and plans for yet larger stockings imminent. After all, the Guadalupe bass is the official state fish of Texas, thus designated by the Texas Legislature in 1989.

While the genetics issue is bothersome for fisheries biologists and us admitted Tex-eccentrics, for pure piscatorial pleasures, these Blanco hybrids leave no change on the table.

Each fish I pull from the air-clear Blanco is uniquely patterned, ranging from the chain of distinctive diamond splotches of the Guad to the vertical bars of a smallmouth to a crazy quilt of squiggly horizontal stripes.

"What you're seeing is the result of multiple generations," said Garrett. "The F1s [biologist-speak for first generation] looked halfway in-between Guadalupes and smallmouths; their offspring might cross with a pure-strain Guad or smallmouth or another hybrid. After several generations, the coloration possibilities are almost endless."

Indeed. And that's just another reason the Blanco surprises and delights those who fish here.

Stalking Spawning Smallies

The spawn on the Blanco runs from late February well into May, and biologists and anglers alike

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debate what makes it last so long. Most likely, it's a combination of factors: the earlier-spawning smallmouths crossing with the later-spawning Guadalupes, temperature and water flow. But who's to argue? On this beautiful May morning, I'm just happy the spawn's still on.

"The fish hang right at the edge of the secondary shelf," says Watson, as he points to two converging rock shelves that act as a funnel above a small series of rapids. "Cast right there."

I do and am quickly rewarded with an electric zing, connecting the fish's life force with my own.

"Stick her hard," Watson said, "or she'll spit it out." I do, and we bring to hand another beauty, this one a remarkably patterned green-and-gold giantess. We photograph her, and gently release her to return to her nest.

Watson not only lives by the river; he's on it nearly every day and has developed tactics and favorite baits to mimic the native forage.

"I like the Heddon Tiny Torpedo, which sounds like a cicada hitting the water," he said, "and spring cicadas are a favorite forage. Fish it with a short, jerky retrieve."

Another weapon in his arsenal is a Rebel crawfish crankbait, which he modifies by removing both hooks and replacing the rear one only with a No. 8 treble hook. Soft plastic hellgrammites (immature dobsonflies) are another popular Blanco banquet, along with 4- to 6-inch plastic lizards.

The most unusual bait, and arguably the most lethal, Watson fishes is a soft-plastic baby catfish, the original "MadTom" from Case Plastics. "The Blanco is so clear, it's like a laboratory," Watson said. "On most rivers, you

couldn't see 15 to 20 feet down and watch bass gobbling baby catfish on the bottom. When I saw that, I knew baby catfish were among their top food sources.

"Also, lose that monofilament. I've switched to braided line only. It might be a bit more expensive, but the fish can't break it off as easily as they do mono."

Nightfall On The Blanco

The barred owl's "Who Cooks for You?" echoes off the limestone ledges across the Blanco — but wait, it's not an echo, but an answering owl. The nearer owl calls again, stridently, persistently, until the encroacher is successfully warned off his territory and answers no more.

Shafts of sunlight pierce the pecan canopy above, spotlighting the emerald riparian glade below, as I perch, mojito in hand, in a rustic wooden rocking chair atop an ancient Indian midden.

"This area's been inhabited for about 10,000 years," Watson said. "Folks know a good spot when they see one."


A four-point buck, trailed by a timid doe, emerges from the thicket into the glade.

Just then, a squirrel clatters down through the canopy, and the owl strafes in with a whoosh of feathers, barreling for the tree as the squirrel disappears around the other side. Talons extended, the owl pivots in a 360-degree, knife-edge pass around the massive trunk, hapless squirrel in his clutches as he lumbers off.

Did you see that? Watson's eyes and mine meet, no words needed. It's the perfect end to a perfect day in the endless dance of predator and prey. ■





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