

## The Muy Grande's of South Texas – A Tale Of Two Lakes

by Ed Snyder/Lakecaster

01/01/2002 - *South Texas* .... An unbelievable fishing adventure, incredible outdoor vistas, and wonderful wildlife images awaited me as I cruised south on I-59 through Houston, Victoria, and Beeville until finally turning into the crossroads community of Three Rivers, Texas. Stopping only for a quick coffee and high-noon sandwich, I then turned west on Hwy-72 and drove towards a special little piece of Eden, where Muy Grande's roam the windy shores of Choke Canyon Lake.

"I've visited this wonderful place before on a previous years trip, which had me lined up with Debra Hengst, of San Antonio, Texas, for working a bass fishing story on Choke Canyon and Falcon lakes. But due to arctic cold-front conditions, with chilling, cutting winds, our trip was canceled, where I then decided to head for Rockport, on the Texas Gulf Coast, to do a saltwater story instead. But an afternoon detour to the nearby Wildlife Refuge of the Calliham State Park quickly changed my saltwater ambitions, especially after what my camera witnessed within the confines of that amazing little patch of Mesquite scrub and Cactus brush.



Debra Hengst with  
Choke Canyon "Muy Grande"  
photo by Ed Snyder/Lakecaster

"Now back again this year, Debra Hengst and I had rescheduled our fishing trip for Choke and Falcon Lakes, and my hopeful interests of getting a good fishing story. But once again, as before, we had to wrestle with a possible postponement as cold-front weather conditions threatened, and bass fishing reports on both lakes looked grim and iffy at best. But before a saltwater detour to Rockport could be scheduled by me, Debra quickly decided, "what the heck, let's meet at Elroy's by 7:am to just go fishing, and what happens, 'HAPPENS'!! "

With my already having spent three days trekking and scouting through the cactus & mesquite scrub of Calliham, chasing, and being chased by deer and javelina, but sniping some incredible images of 12 and 14 point Muy Grande Bucks that roam free there, I was now ready for "the other" Muy Grande's, which were whispered to be swimming within the waters of Choke Canyon.

And little did I know then, but what was about to "HAPPEN" on Choke and Falcon Lakes with Debra Hengst would become a most treasured memory of an unbelievable fishing adventure.

Quick hugs, transferred camera gear, and apologies for being 30 minutes late, preceded our early morning launch at the South-Shore Park, where Debra hurriedly throttled her Skeeter/Yamaha bass-rig out from the ramp to initiate the first phase, of her two phase fishing plan. "My plan is to fish the morning bite on Choke until about 10:am, Debra informed, "and then pull out of Choke Canyon and head for Lake Falcon to try and catch the afternoon bite.

Her plan seemed a bit far-fetched to me, which would involve us bass fishing two different lakes

today. Choke Canyon first, then driving down the road for 3 hours to launch into Falcon Lake, which is located along the Rio Grande River between Texas and Mexico. "But what the heck, I was fully committed now and was along for the ride."

And "WHAT" an unbelievable ride it would turn out to be!!"



Calliham Wildlife Refuge  
"Muy Grande"  
photo by Ed Snyder/Lakecaster

**Phase-I -Choke Canyon Lake** - A 26,000 acre reservoir located 70 miles south of San Antonio, and 60 miles north of Corpus Christi off of Hwy 281 and I-37 near the town of Three Rivers TX, where the Frio, Nueces, and Atascosa rivers pass through. Choke Canyon Lake hosts an active fishery that provides bass, crappie, catfish, striper, and white bass for its visitors. Situated twelve miles west of Three Rivers on Hwy 72, is the Calliham State Park & Wildlife Refuge.

Starting along the south shore area, Debra Hengst and I concentrated on fishing the 2-to -6 ft shoreline drop-offs with Strike King Pro-Model crank-baits in red/crawfish or blue/chartreuse, Strike King Premier Pro-Model double willow spinner-baits in fire/tiger, and Texas rigged Zoom watermelon/red super flukes.

"Although the lake is on a 4 & 1/2 foot rise now from an 18 inch rainfall of last week, Debra explained, "it is still 20 feet below normal pool due to previous years of drought, and with the incoming run-off from those flood-waters churning up the lake and dropping the lake temps, Debra groaned, "it may be difficult to find some good picture-bass for your camera. "That's ok, I quipped with a smile, "any bass right now that can bite on cue, will become fodder for my camera. After quick chuckles by both of us we continued to fish the lake hard for what we hoped would be a solid Choke Canyon photo-bass.

After fishing the south shore area, all the way to the back of the State Park ramp, Debra figured that the bass weren't holding in the freshly covered grass and reeds, and decided to try some deepwater structure along a big flat near the dam. Working Carolina E-Z Rig weights with Zoom flukes we begun tediously fishing every drop-off ledge, lump, or hump in our quest for a Choke Canyon lunker. "I became acquainted with these EZ-rigs from National Bass/Pro, and friend, Kathy Majors, Debra stated, "who produced them back in 1998 at the WBFA National Tourney on Kentucky Barkley lakes, but you can now can get these E-Z rigs from Strike King.

After failing to get any hookups along the dam area, I asked Debra if she knew of any protected clear water areas that may have some hydrilla patches in them. "Sure do, she answered as we hurriedly strapped down and throttled over to an area of the lake known as Four Fingers. Time was getting short for keeping to our schedule, and with the clock now ticking past 9:am, we started fishing our way to the back of Four Fingers. "Working past another boat, our fishing enthusiasm recharged after finding out that they had caught two keeper bass on spinner-baits earlier. But as our time began approaching our 10:am departure mark, we discussed giving up on Choke and heading for Falcon instead. But upon nearing the back of a little timber cove, Debra decided to give it "one more cast".

As Debra moved us into the cove, she tossed her Strike King spinner-bait to where some baitfish were working over a hydrilla clump. Working her spinner-bait through the nervous water, Debra then practically had her rod ripped from her hands as the water suddenly exploded around her engulfed spinner-bait. "GEEZE, I yelled, as Debra, "YELLING-BACK", pleaded for me to help her land the huge bass. Easier said than done, but after three heart-throbbing runs and two nerve-wracking jumps, she finally managed to work the bass alongside the boat where I quickly lip-landed it for her.

"WOW" was my stunned vocal as a huge bass lay on the deck, and "WOW" was all Debra could

muster after her electronic scale digitized its weight at 8.3 lbs. After some quick high-5's, congratulatory hugs, and photo-snaps of some very impressive "Debra with Bass" images, she carefully released the "Muy Grande" back into the lake.

My playful after question of, "Okay, now what do we do NOW! Was just as playfully answered by Debra with a big Texas grin, "Whelp, now we go to Falcon ... silly!!

***Phase II-Falcon Lake-*** A 78,300 acre reservoir situated on the Rio Grande River between Mexico and Texas, Lake Falcon is centrally located along TX Hwy 83 that passes through the city of Zapata, Texas. This international border-lake with Mexico has an annual lake level fluctuation that can vary between 40 to 50 feet. Holding a present lake record of 15.12 lbs for black bass, and an "un-official" 5 bass/54 lb tournament weight, Falcon is a favored tournament lake for several local, regional, and national circuits and draws heavy interests from most "serious" bass anglers. Another Falcon attraction are the "millions" of exotic bird-life and waterfowl that winter around the lake each year.

Our 140-mile drive from Choke Canyon to Falcon Lake was a pleasurable trip as we drove along scenic Hwy 16 from Tilden, through Freer, Hebronville, and Randado before reaching Zapata, Texas. Although the drive took three hours, it didn't seem quite that long as I was treated to the rolling vista of southwest Texas scenery, where mesquite scrub, and cactus brush was well populated with semi-desert wildlife, which included Mexican Eagles, White Tailed Hawks, Red Tailed Hawks, and .... "Debra Hengst!"



Debra, a fulltime Independent Insurance Agent for Tom Moore & Associates of San Antonio, Texas, is also a Skeeter Bass Boat Pro-Team member who competes at National Bass Tournament events, as well as being a professional fishing guide for Choke Canyon and Falcon Lakes. And now, after kidnapping and dragging me to Falcon with my camera strapped around my neck, we were on a whirlwind trip from Choke Canyon, where her amazing feat of catching an 8.3 lb "Muy Grande" bass is well recorded within my photo-file. For most of our drive to Falcon, our conversation was mostly centered around her incredible bass catch on Choke, but, in betwixt our rehashing of that wondrous event "hovered" the question, "Could she repeat such a catch on Falcon?" "Well, I don't know about that, Debra answered, "but I feel good about fishing Falcon at this time of year.

Getting me legal for fishing the Mexican side of Falcon, required us a stopping at Falcon Lake Tackle in Zapata, Texas, where I purchased my Non-Resident Mexican Fishing license from Owner/Proprietor, Larry Bridgeman. Larry's shop is an oasis of sorts that holds an unbelievable array of tackle & baits that would rival any Super-Store. Larry is also a safe-harbor for active information on what Falcon's fishery is doing, and this writer-anglers advice to anyone fishing Falcon for pleasure, or bass tournament competition, would be to FIRST make a stop at Bridgeman's, or call him at -(956)-765-4866.

We pulled out from Zapata around 2pm, and after a short ride south on Hwy 83, we managed to launch out of the Texas State Park near the Falcon Lake Dam. Idling out from the shoreline sand-ramp we had just launched from, Debra remarked that because the lake level was so low that the normal launch-ramps were not usable. I then tightened my cap and braced for our run across the lake after Debra throttled up and yelled; "Now we are going fishing into Mexican waters and "living La Vida Loca, so hang on tight!!"

"This is my favorite place to fish on Falcon, Debra informed as we motored into a cove on Salinillas

Creek. We began fishing spinner-baits & flukes along the west side in some feeder creeks where she hoped the bass might be holding in shallow hardwoods. Running into some friends of hers, they informed us that they had some short strikes on spinner-baits earlier, but caught no fish. After fishing the Salinillas area hard with no strikes and slowly running out of daylight. "Debra decided to motorvate to plan-B.

A short run put us within Debra's plan-B spot where she knew usually held big fish at this time of year, "This is where I usually fish for my "kicker-bass" when fishing a bass tournament, Debra informed. (Writers note- kicker-bass are a heavier class of bass that help to "kick-up" a tournament anglers weight for winning, or placing in the money. Due to this fact Debra requested that I did not reveal its location in this story. "Nuff-said")

Moving into a little creek full of flooded Huisache (wee-satch) and Salt Cedar brush, the sun began setting on the horizon, which didn't give us much time for fishing, let alone to catch a good photo-bass. But with the creek area suddenly coming alive with baitfish activity all around us, I felt in my heart that the stage was being set for some exciting fishing action and all it would take now was for us to play our parts to make it happen.

Cautiously entering Debra's secret spot, she advised me to throw my spinner bait to a briary looking bush that she felt might be holding a big fish, but before I could make my cast, Debra positioned the boat and flipped her fluke towards the base of the bush.

"THERE SHE IS, Debra shrieked!!" ...Not convinced she had actually hooked a fish so quickly, but had just snagged-up instead, I just stood frozen in time until I saw the bow in her rod "THROB" from the surge of a big fish! Throwing my rod down for the second time today on this wondrous fishing trip, I then prepared to land ANOTHER Debra Hengst Muy Grande!

A watermelon/red Zoom super salty fluke, its tail dipped with a hint of chartreuse dye and with KicknBass Garlic scent smothered all over, became the enticement for Debra's second "lucky" catch of the day, BUT an unforeseen and possible disastrous situation almost ruined our perfect day.

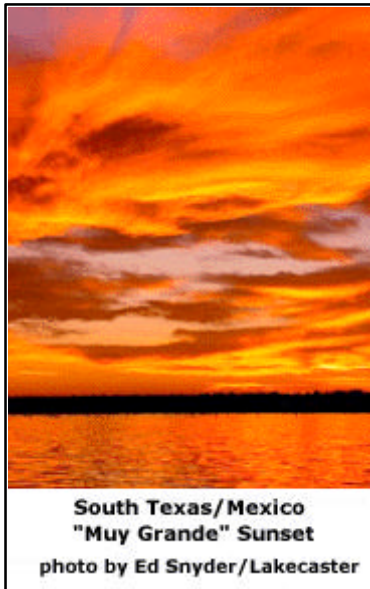
"She has me wrapped around a wiry old Huisache bush, Debra spoke out in sudden fear, "and if I pull too hard my 17 lb test Stren super-tough monofilament line may get nicked and shredded by the thorns and break-off the bass. "Huisache, are small scrubby bush loaded with viciously sharp inch long thorns, are the worse possible thing for any bass to get hung-up on, and with Debra's bass now wrapped around this thorny bush several times, it wasn't looking good for us landing this big fish. But with both of us praying for a bit of luck, I then bellied flat on the deck of her boat and started working my hands down the fishing line, trying to feel my way towards the head of the snagged bass.

Balancing half-way over the side of the boat, I worked carefully, trying not to pull too hard and break the line, but after many failed attempts to free the fish, I then told Debra to ease up on the line to give it some slack. After doing so, Debra then informed me that she couldn't feel the bass anymore and felt it must've pulled loose or broke off. Feeling absolutely sick and sad about losing such a good bass, I then prepared to cut the line free from the brush when the bass suddenly managed to swim out from the snag and just "popped-up" on the surface, within inches of my eyes.

"Whelp, let me tell-ya folks, with my vision suddenly filled with such an unbelievable sight and with my left hand still clutching the cutting knife, all I could do was to hand-grab the wallowing bass by its gaping jaw with my right hand and toss it up onto the deck of the boat.

A healthy native Falcon bass, its belly swelled full of baby bass, was laid out on the deck before us. The bass had been on a spawning bed at the bottom of that wicked Huisache bush where she had been fanning a nest with her "still dripping" bloody tail..."Amazing!

"WOW" was my stunned "Deja-Vu" vocal upon viewing a second huge bass on the deck of Debra's bass boat that day, and "WOW" was Debra's repeat comment as her electronics digitized a weight of 7.6 lbs. And once again, after some quick high-5's, congratulatory hugs, and photo-snaps of some very impressive "Debra with Bass" images, she carefully released the Falcon "Muy Grande" back into the lake



With the sun beginning to set on Mexico's horizon, we started motoring out from Debra's secret fishing spot and head back to the Texas side of Falcon. But as we slowly threaded our way through the heavily timbered creek, I turned to view the setting sun as it began painting the skyline with its magic brush of brilliant colors. "WOW" was my stunned comment as I moved to take yet another image of a South Texas "Muy Grande."

Our trip came to a perfect finale after enjoying an evenings meal at a quaint little Mexican Restaurante' within the little border village of Nueva Ciudad Guerrero, and after a well deserved nights rest in the comforts of Falcon Heights Motel & R.V. Park, the next morning found Debra heading off to her beloved San Antonio, and I to my east Texas home of Sam Rayburn to write this amazing story.

And amazing as it sounds, Debra Hengst managed to call the shots for both of her lunker catches on this trip of unbelievable fishing action, where she managed to put an 8.3 -lb Choke Canyon bass and a 7.6 -lb Lake Falcon bass in her boat within only hours of each other from two distant lake systems that were 140 miles apart. An amazing feat of luck for anyone, but Debra Hengst, a professional fishing guide for both Choke and Falcon lakes, definitely provides an edge for her incredible "luck". But I also came away from my fishing adventure with first hand knowledge of what a quality adventures these two south Texas lakes are capable of providing for its visiting public.

But I also came away from this trip with some painful memories after personally experiencing just how "mean" those Mexican Bass can be. Just ask and I'll show you the fading scars from Debra's Huisache bass after it "chomped" five bloody bite-marks on my hand upon attempting to retrieve it from her live-well for pictures, leaving me with painful, but newfound respects for those Falcon/Mexican bass.

Falcon Heights Motel & R.V. Park, conveniently located near the entrance of the Falcon State Park, can be contacted for reservations by calling (956)-848-5229. Choke Canyon's Calliham Wildlife Refuge & Park can be contacted by calling (361)-786-3868.

And those of you who wish to enjoy an exciting Muy Grande' adventure with "wild-life" Pro/Fishing guide Debra Hengst -call (210)-492-0116- or cell-call (210)-241-1959.

(Writers note- One of my final questions for Debra was, "Now that we've successfully fished Choke and Falcon lakes, what could possibly top that on my next trip? "Well, Debra smiled back in response, "have you ever been to Lake Amistad?... HmMMMM!")