



Choke Canyon Predictions

By: *Pete Robbins*

CALLIHAM, Texas — When 64 PAA pros descend on Choke Canyon Reservoir later this week for the season-opening tournament, many of them will have their minds on Lake Fork. After all, while there's the opportunity to earn a good check in this event, the ultimate prize is a berth in the upcoming Toyota Texas Bass Classic at Fork.

But if they look too far past Choke Canyon, they'll be doing themselves a disservice. This lake, impounded in 1982 to provide a water supply for the city of Corpus Christi, is one of the unsung jewels of Texas.

Women's Bassmaster Tour pro Debra Hengst, who has fished on Choke Canyon for over 20 years and guides on Choke, predicted that it could take 48 to 50 pounds to win the event over two days.

As proof of the lake's potential, she referred back to a 2007 Bass Champs event in which the winning team corralled five fish for 45 pounds. Second place had over 40, including an 11 pound kicker, and there was a 12 pounder caught by another team in the top 10.

"I believe the next state record could come out of Choke," she said. "It's pretty darn fertile. Amistad or Falcon could produce it too, but I feel like Choke has a pretty good shot at it. We'll definitely see double digit fish next week."

If the lake is so productive, why hasn't it been on the national bass fishing radar until recently? "Probably because when we went through the drought it was 22 feet low," she said. "It's currently a foot low and now it's producing big bags of fish."

She believes that March and April are the lake's most productive window of opportunity, and said that the fish probably have not started to spawn yet, but they could move up shallow at any time.

"I don't think it will happen until March, but we've had a nice week or warm weather and we're due to have another one. The water temperatures right now are in the mid-50's, but that warm stretch could push them up."

Because the lake was built to supply water to the citizens of Corpus Christi, there is no shoreline development — no private marinas, docks or lakeside homes. But there is abundant hydrilla, and the angler who finds the right stretch of grass can load the boat with football-shaped Florida-strain bass in a matter of minutes.

While the Floridas grow big, Hengst said that on occasion they can also be "a real thorn in my side. It's a finicky lake. When they shut down, they won't respond to anything. It's not a big lake or a deep lake, but sometimes I just don't know where they go."

She believes that a jig fished in the hydrilla or deeper trees will be the winning ticket, "but if it warmed up, a blade could be deadly." And for those anglers who are proficient with a deep diving crankbait, the fish could be stacked on some of the sharply dropping ledges as well.

While the pros' sights will be firmly focused on fishing, she noted that the area around Choke Canyon is also well-known for its abundant wildlife. "It's like a wildlife park out there. There are deer, javelinas and turkeys everywhere. It's a photographer's dream."

She added that the lake itself is chock full of "huge alligators...12 to 15 footers," and area archaeological digs have produced a wealth of evidence that there region was also chock full of wildlife such in the prehistoric era. While that may not seem relevant to the TTBC Qualifier anglers, the long history of fertility bodes well for a top-notch lake that only now is beginning to get the recognition it is due.

