

A Rare Lake Keowee Catch

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This morning started like many of my summer fishing mornings. I had no idea that something extraordinary was going to happen. I woke up without an alarm at 5AM, looked out the window at the stars, saw that dawn was about to crack, and then, surprise surprise, I decided to go fishing.

I quickly dressed and took my gear down to my dock (near Mile Creek Park). I unplugged the battery charger from my trolling motor battery, mounted my electronics in my boat, and checked the water depth and temperature. In my slip, the water level under my boat read 13 ½ feet, and since I knew that at full pond the electronics would read 19 ½ feet, that put the lake level at 6 feet below full pond. So right away I knew which shallows out on the lake I would not be able to pass over in the dark. My electronics said the surface water temperature at my dock was 89°F. Water that temperature didn't hold much oxygen, so in my area the big fish wouldn't be spending much time in the shallows.

I decided to boat over to the Little River and try fishing upstream of the 183 bridge hoping to find water a little cooler there. The surface was smooth. There was no wind. So I prepared two of the fishing rods I had along: one with a baby-bass-colored Shibuki Popper, and one with a shad-colored X-rap jerk bait. Then I started my motor, turned on my running lights, untied my boat, and headed out.

I got to the Little River bridge around 6 AM, just after the crack of dawn. In the Little River the surface water temperature proved to be 87°F, two degrees better than my home area but still very warm. I started throwing the popper in and around shallows that dropped off quickly to deep water. After about 15 minutes of constantly moving along the shallows, I managed to snag my popper on a stick slightly out of the water in the middle of shallows. I raised my main motor and my trolling motor, took out my emergency paddle, and paddled into the shallows to where my bow touched bottom. I managed to retrieve the lure from where the boat had grounded. I paddled myself back off the shallows and stowed the paddle again before putting the trolling motor back into the water and continuing. Shortly thereafter I got a small strike on the popper and boated a 12-inch spotted bass. That was a long time to catch my first fish, but to be expected in the summer. I decided to go a little deeper to try for bigger bass. I switched to the jerk bait and kept going. After another 15 minutes I caught a 14 ¾ inch spotted bass on the jerk bait.

A cloudbank came in and hid the sunrise as the morning got brighter. By 7AM I hadn't caught anything else. So I thought I should try a surface lure again but something different, so I put on a bass-colored Super Spook Jr. and kept going along the edges of shallows near deep water throwing that lure.

I thought I was paying attention to where I was throwing, but suddenly my line simply and silently went tight, very solidly tight, like a snag. It was a surface lure, so it shouldn't be snagged on the bottom! I hadn't seen any sticks where I had thrown the lure. I hadn't felt any big jerk on the line like you get when a bass really strikes a lure. I realized that I had been looking at the scenery when the line went tight, but I hadn't heard any splash around my surface lure. And if a really big bass takes in a surface lure I can usually at least hear a little sucking sound as the fish takes the lure, but I hadn't heard any

sucking sounds. However, my lure was now under water, almost as if some giant unseen hand had simply reached up out of the depths, grabbed my lure, and pulled it down.

I pulled hard, and whatever I was hooked on didn't seem to move at all. So I held tension on the line with the rod bent over and steady to see whether something at the other was at least moving. Yes! I saw slight movement in the rod tip! Not a lot of movement, but definitely movement ... like some *really* big fish just taking its time not worried about anything! I couldn't pull it in; when I tried to pull it in a little line escaped through the heavily set drag. But whatever I'd hooked wasn't in a hurry to swim away either.

So, I simply pulled hard enough to keep the rod bent with the line tension near the limit of the drag, and I held it there. Nothing much happened at first. Then, whatever was on the other end of the line started swimming slowly in a big circle, not taking out any line, but not coming closer to the boat either. The line started passing under the bow of the boat, and I jammed the rod tip down into the water to keep the line from getting caught on the trolling motor. The line passed under the trolling motor. I kept the rod tip down and the rod bent as the line slowly shifted toward the stern of the boat. I gave thanks that I hadn't lowered the main engine after I had raised it to retrieve my popper from the stick.

The line came out from under the raised engine at the stern and kept going around to complete a full circle. Then whatever it was started coming toward the boat. I was able to reel in a little line until the line went straight down into the water. I held the rod bent, keeping tension on the line at the limit of the drag. I tried to pull up whatever it was. It wouldn't come up. The rod tip kept slowly going up and down as my river monster swam small circles around and around near the bottom.

I mentally prepared myself to see a huge catfish. Slowly it started coming up. I got it up far enough to see a little swirl of dark color with a flash of something light, and then it dove again pulling line out through out the drag. What I had glimpsed very briefly seemed asymmetrical, like the tail of a catfish slowly swishing around as it dove back down again. Once again I was simply holding onto the rod, keeping it bent, wondering how long it take to tire out this thing.

I was getting tired. I managed to keep tension on the line as I got down off my bow fishing seat and moved to the center of the boat where I could stand to work my line using a different set of muscles and also reach my landing net when needed. I started hoping that whatever it was would fit into my landing net.

Suddenly it started coming up fast. I reeled in the line fast to keep up with it. It came all the way to the surface. I stared at it in shock as I heard it gasp several times for air with my line pulling its head out of the water. Then it dove back down to the bottom, pulling line out against the drag.

In all my 13 years of fishing on Lake Keowee, I had never caught one of these on a bass lure. It was a big old monster turtle! So big that I doubted I could get it into my landing net. Now that I knew what it was, I had no particular interest in catching this turtle, but I wanted my lure back. The turtle appeared to be hooked on both the treble hooks on the Spook. One set of hooks was in the head, and the other was in the front left foot, as if the turtle had reached up to push away the first hook and had hooked itself in the foot on the second set of hooks. Even with one foot and its head hobbled together by

the lure, it was still strong enough to hold itself near the bottom against the pull of my line.

I just had to be patient. I simply stood there with my rod bent and looked around to see exactly where my landing net was, so I could plan how to get it when I needed it. Finally, the turtle came to the surface again. I let go of the crank handle of my open-face spinning reel with my left hand, and reached to grab the landing net. As I extended the landing net out over the water, the turtle turned its head to look at it, then quickly dove again to the bottom, pulling out the line. I put down the net in a more accessible position and put my hand back on the reel handle so I could wind in the line again. Two more times I brought the turtle to the surface, and each time, when it saw the net, it dove to the bottom again. The next time I got it to the surface, I put the net into the water as far away from the turtle as I could and tried coming up underneath the turtle.

When the net hit the underside of the turtle, it started lifting the turtle out of the water without the turtle going into the net. I quickly put down my rod in the bottom of the boat and put both hands on the net handle to try to lift the heavy turtle into the boat. The turtle tried to get off the landing net, in the struggle it must have sensed real danger and pulled its neck and legs inside its shell. With its extremities inside the shell, the turtle just barely slipped down into the landing net, and I brought it aboard. The netting was so tight around the edges of the shell, that it confined the extremities of the turtle inside the shell. That kept the turtle from squirming, but it also kept me from getting at the hooks.

I managed to adjust the net so the head of the turtle could come out and I could maneuver my long-nosed pliers to get the hook out of the turtle's head. The next task was trying to get the hook out of the foot while the turtle was unhappily trying to bite anything that came close. I eventually managed to get the second treble hook out as well.

I had stopped a few times to take pictures of the turtle. And now, with the hooks out, I put down my tools to take another picture. The turtle, with one leg and its head free and clear, stuck its neck out about 9 inches and launched itself out of the landing net toward the extra rods rigged with various lures at the side of the boat. I put down the camera and tried to get to my rods before the turtle did. I didn't make it. Fortunately, the turtle was a well armored tank and simply crawled right up over all my rods and lures without getting hooked, and slipped overboard.

Most of the hooks on my Spook were bent out of shape, and I had to use the long-nosed pliers to bend them back into shape before I continued fishing. But after a few casts I decided I'd had enough excitement for one day and came in to write the story of the Lake Keowee spiny softshell turtle, pictured below, that I caught on a Super Spook Jr. surface lure.

If you spend a lot of time fishing on Lake Keowee, you never know what kind of things might happen to you!

NOTE: If you are looking for some fishing hints about fishing Lake Keowee in the September-October time frame, look at previous articles I have written that are available on the FOLKS website: go to www.keoweefolks.org ; then click on Lakeside at the top, and then on the Fishing icon. There you can check out the Sept2014 article. And since September and October are transition months from the Summer fishing pattern to the

Late Fall fishing, you might also look at the Nov2014 article as well as my article from July2015.

