

A Lake Keowee Fishing Adventure in My Center of the Universe

- Bill Walker, Keowee Anglers

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Suddenly, at 4 AM, I was awake. I got up and went out to re-experience Lake Keowee as my center of the universe. Having done this often in the last 11 years, I thought I knew what I would find. However, I did not imagine the ways in which, in addition to revealing again my center of the universe, Lake Keowee had its own special adventures in store for me this morning.

In the dark I took my fishing gear down to the dock and loaded it into my boat. There was no wind. The water along the lakeshore was still and silent. The crickets were singing along the shore almost masking the occasional chirp of a tree frog. As I stepped into my boat, I triggered a few small waves that lapped against the floats on my dock. I started my almost-silent motor, undid the mooring lines, and backed out of my dock. Once out of my dock where fishing rods might have gotten hung up, I arrayed my rods ready for action. I set my depth finders for low-intensity display with black background for minimal interference with my night vision, turned on my running lights, and headed out to one of my dark, quiet, peaceful places where before dawn any houses in the area don't have any lights on. Plenty of these dark places still exist waiting to be found scattered among Lake Keowee's islands or in its long narrow quiet bays.

After I got there and turned off my engine, I turned out my running lights to free my night vision. I looked around enjoying the sights and sounds of the moonless, starry night. Orion, the warrior, had one leg and his body already up over the eastern horizon where there was still not the slightest hint of the coming dawn. Above me at the top of the starry dome, Cassiopeia, seated in her W-shaped chair, looked out over all the heavens. And north of me the two bears, Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, wandered the sky with Polaris, the North Star, holding onto the little bear's tail. A shooting star streaked across the sky, probably a leftover from the meteor showers forecast for earlier in the morning, which I had missed. I sighed at the wonder of all those stars showing in the moonless sky.

I let my eyes trace the daytime path the sun takes across the sky, which is also the location of the ecliptic in the night sky. At night in this narrow band of sky all the visible planets can be seen if they are in the sky at all. This morning, in the ecliptic high above the eastern horizon, Jupiter shone brightly in all its glory. And closer to the horizon, barely discernible through the eastern haze, I thought I might have seen a glimpse Mars.

All around me the still water surface mirrored the stars above. The earth appeared like a huge donut of the circling shoreline. Stars not only twinkled above, they also appeared to be visible down through the donut hole. And here I was floating in the middle of the hole surrounded by a ring of land. Beyond that ring, above and below, the entire universe twinkled around me. I felt alone in the center of the universe.

I mused that it's not even clear the universe has a center. Here I was, here we all are, traveling through the vast emptiness of space on a huge spaceship, Earth. The difference between our Earth-ship and science fiction spaceships is that on

spaceship Earth the people all live on the outside of the ship, living in a layer of atmosphere that is unbelievably thin compared to the size of Earth! Our atmosphere is so thin, that if the Earth were the size of a basketball, the atmosphere we live in around it would only be as thick as about 3 sheets of plastic garbage bag. And here we are, soaring through the void of space toward who knows where among the stars and galaxies, living on the outside skin of our vehicle!

Finally, I pulled myself away from my reverie and picked up a rod rigged with a fish-colored, DAWG-100 top-water lure. I could barely see the outline of the shore and cast cautiously, trying to get close to shore, but not up in the brush on the bank. As my lure flew into the darkness, I held my breath and waited to hear what sound my lure would make when it landed. I heard a small satisfying splash somewhere back in the dark reflection of the shore as my lure hit water. I sighed to myself in relief that it had not hit rocks or bushes. Then I retrieved the lure with regular jerks making it zigzag toward me in the water, a pattern called "walking the dog". Nothing happened on my first two casts. As I walked the DAWG back from the dark shadows the third time, a little slap sounded somewhere near my lure, but I didn't feel anything on the line. Probably a bass too small for my lure had tried to take a trial bite to see what this swimming thing was, and missed. Larger bass have no problem taking this lure, but at this water temperature, the larger bass don't spend much time in the shallows. I tried a couple more casts. When nothing more happened, I moved on along the shore.

"Whoop, WhoWho, OooWho, OooWho", an owl called from the dark not so far away. I paused and looked up. Again I heard it. "Whoop, WhoWho, OooWho, OooWho, OooWho, OooWho." The owl kept on calling as I moved on down the shoreline to a shallow point on the main lake. While listening to the owl I almost missed another slap at my lure. I let the lure sit still in the water for a moment before moving it again. I gave it a tentative twitch and again a sucking slap at my lure, and a little bump on my line. But nothing hooked up, and the strikes were not repeated.

Now a hint of dawn light was glowing on the eastern horizon. With too few clouds to create a spectacular sunrise, the glow simply grew and got brighter as I moved up the shore. Now I cast more confidently because I could see the shoreline better and could gauge more accurately its distance from me. I took great pleasure in the Zen of being able to cast the lure right where I wanted it, right next to a rock here, right next to a fallen tree there by the shore, and so on. I have practiced a lot, and with enough light I can simply look at a spot and flick my arm for a cast, and most of the time the lure lands in the small area where I'm looking. It's a fun kind of target practice.

Eventually, I gave up on this section of shore, started my engine, and moved to a shallow point where the previous morning I had seen from a distance a white wading bird looking for minnows. The white wading bird was there again this morning. I turned off the main engine 70 yards away and stalked closer using my trolling motor. As I came right up to within casting range of the point, I saw the bird was all white, fairly large ... and with golden yellow legs! With legs of that color it almost surely had to be a Great White Heron. What a treat! As I watched, it struck its head into the water several times, catching and swallowed a minnow each time. I

thought maybe a bass might also be there stalking the minnows. I looked at the water slightly off shore from the heron and cast in that direction. My DAWG landed in the water about 12 feet from the heron. The heron stopped and looked over at my lure as it splashed. As I started walking it through the water toward me, the heron leapt into the air, half hovered with flapping wings, and half flew toward my lure. The last thing I wanted right then was to catch the heron. I started reeling in my lure as fast as I could. The heron hover-flew after it with wings flapping as if treading air. It was keeping up with my frantic retrieve but not quite getting into a position to strike. Finally, as the lure approached my boat, the heron, banked away and flew back to the shallow point to resume its own version of fishing. Wow, in 11 years I had never before seen a Great White Heron on Lake Keowee! And this had been a thrilling display!

I went on to try a few more points as the sunrise grew brighter and brighter. No bass expressed interest in my lure. Then up ahead along the shore I saw what I thought was a white piece of trash floating in the lake. I went over to pick it up. When I got to it, I discovered it was really a fish, floating belly up but alive, and struggling to dive down into the water. At first I thought it was a large White Bass. White Bass are rare in Lake Keowee, but I have caught them here.

However, as I looked at it more carefully, I realized I was looking at a fish I had never seen in my 11 years of fishing Lake Keowee. Actually I'd never seen one of these in my entire life of 67 years. I netted it, brought it into the boat for a photo, and tried to use my fizzing tool to get the air out of its belly so it would no longer float belly up and would be able to submerge and swim away. (Google "fizzing bass" or "fizzing tool" for more information on this procedure.) I took a quick photo with the fishing wiggling on my ruler. The fish was a full 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches long! Here's the picture!



The fish had all the characteristics of a shad, but I had never seen a shad longer than an inch or two. Could this really be a giant shad in Lake Keowee? That answer would have to wait for later. I felt that had to get it back into the water. I quickly performed the fizzing operation and turned it loose. I was only partially successful in my fizzing. I did well enough so that I couldn't net it again, however it still came

up to the surface occasionally. I finally went on my way, and I'm not sure whether it survived or not.

Finally the sun rose above the ridges and its rays hit the water. Catching bass is difficult after the sun hits the water, so I headed in. All this time I had not seen another boat. Lake Keowee and the heavens above had been all mine! I felt like I had had the lake and my wondrous adventures all to myself. On my way back to my dock around 7:15AM I saw my first other boat of the morning: the Duke Mosquito Control Boat running up the lake.

Even though I'd caught no bass this morning, I was thrilled I had gotten up and gone out on the lake. I'd experienced so many great sights and sounds. You can't have these kinds of adventures without getting out on the lake. Again I fondly remembered my father's saying, "He who goes fishing and complains that he didn't catch any fish forgot why he went."

Mystery Fish Follow up

After I got back home I emailed a picture of my mystery fish to Dan Rankin, Region 1 Fisheries Coordinator for the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources. I asked him about my mystery fish, and he identified it as a gizzard shad, and said that DNR had first noticed these fish in Lake Keowee about two years ago. He described the gizzard shad as follows:

"The gizzard shad is a forage fish and does provide forage for larger bass. There may be some benefits for larger bass in having the larger prey item. We do sometimes see improved condition factors of the bigger largemouth bass in a population where gizzard shad are present. Overall though I still think the costs outweigh this slight benefit. The problem in larger reservoirs is gizzard shad tend to grow very fast and get out of the prey range for black bass species. Gizzard shad do feed heavily on zooplankton (and phytoplankton), and also compete with other fish for invertebrates. There's really no way to predict how abundant the fish will become, but in many southern reservoirs the gizzard shad can occupy a major portion of the overall biomass. Thus, a major amount of the productivity of a system can get 'locked up' in a species that often grows too large to provide forage for resident game fish. With Lakes Keowee and Jocassee being oligotrophic lakes, fertility and primary productivity are already very limited in terms of fueling a robust fishery. Neither lake has a large predator like striped bass to help control numbers of large gizzard shad."

Dan speculated that gizzard shad had possibly been introduced by someone dumping their bait bucket in the lake. To keep unauthorized species from being introduced into lakes and upsetting the ecological balance, law 50-13-665 was recently passed in South Carolina. Law 50-13-665 states:

"Except for bait lost while fishing, it is unlawful to intentionally release any aquatic species, including bait, regardless of the stage of its life cycle, into the

waters of this State without a permit from SCDNR.”

“It is unlawful to use any nonindigenous fish as bait that is not already established in the water body being fished except the following minnows: fathead minnows, golden shiners, and goldfish, including ‘black salties’. No game fish may be used as bait to catch fish recreationally except for bream (other than redbreast). Trout may be used as bait only on Lakes Hartwell, Russell, Thurmond, Tugalo, Yonah, Stevens Creek Reservoir and the Savannah River. When using game fish as bait to catch fish recreationally they must be included in the daily creel limit.”

If I had known all this when I had the gizzard shad in my boat, I would not have released it back into the lake.

[Ed. For a good description of fishing conditions this time of year, when the surface water temp of Lake Keowee in the vicinity of Mile Creek Park drops from around 85-90°F in early September to around 73°F by the end of October, reread Bill Walker’s article in the September/October 2012 edition of the Sentinel.]

