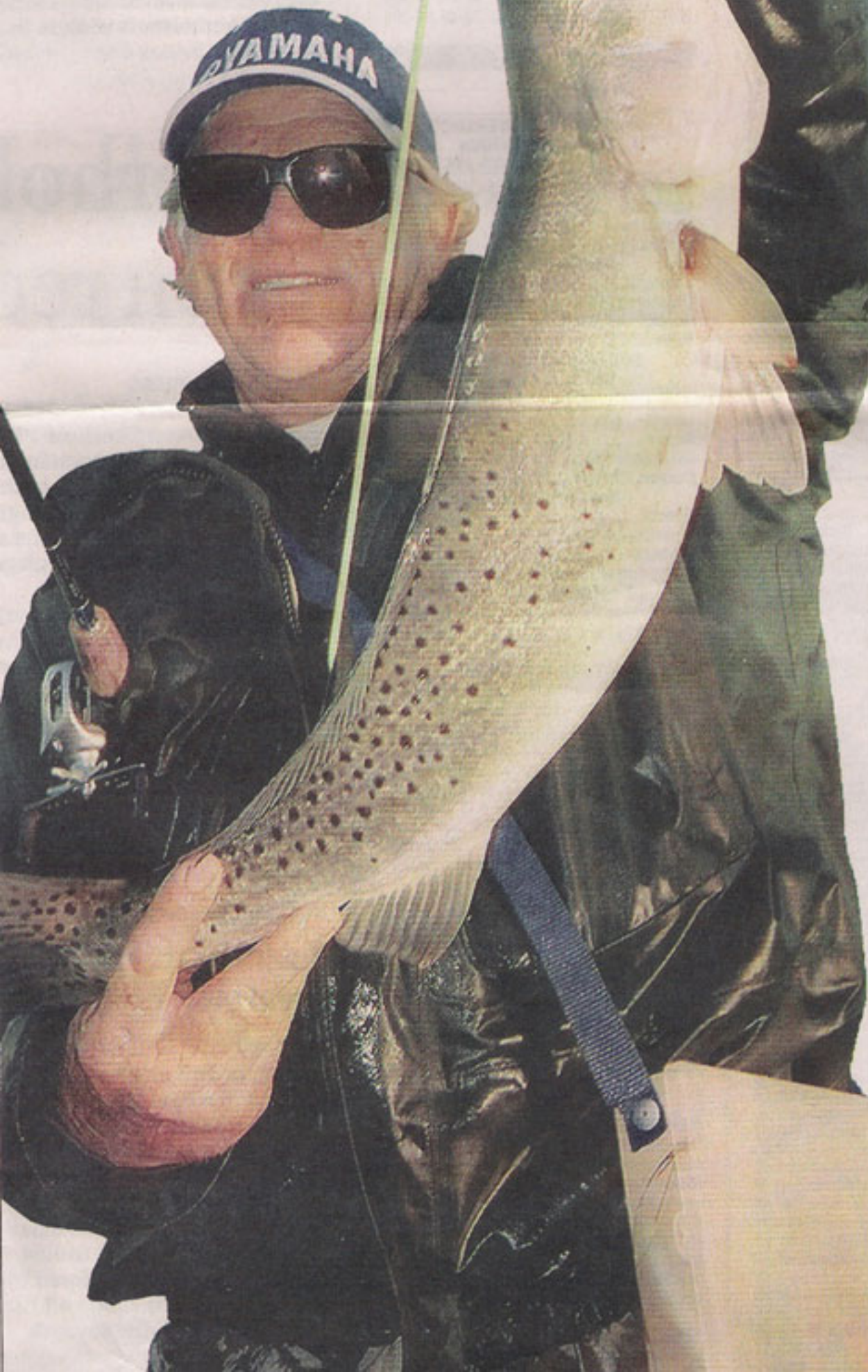


Houston's Greg Woodard is among the big-trout hunters who concentrate hours of effort in Coastal Bend waters each February. This visit produced an 8.25-pound fish.

They say misery loves company — but the King Ranch shoreline offers big-trout seekers looking to avoid the Baffin Bay crowds a ...



CHANGE OF PACE

Almost nothing was the same. Rather than overcast, cold and drizzly, this blue-sky morning bordered on warm. Instead of a low unstable barometric pressure and a north wind, this day's pressure was high and holding with a west wind.

At least the month was the same and so was the quest. The former is key to the latter. Around here, February is for big trout and those who seek them. And as it turned out, this February is for dispelling a long-held myth that mud marching in misery is the only way to catch the trout of a lifetime.

This myth embedded in Coastal Bend fishing lore was born in 1996 on a day that has been written about with the kind of reverence typically reserved for religious or patriotic themes. On that early February day, Jim Wallace and friends caught perhaps the most impressive lineup of speckled trout ever assembled in proximity.

During that blustery day on Baffin Bay, Wallace and two partners — Ed Stedman of Beaumont and Ronnie Sellers of Houston — caught an 11-pound, 10-ounce trout, a 11-4, a 10-12, a 10-5, a 10-even, a 9-13, a 9-10, a 9-3, a 9-2, two 8-13s and the then-state record 13-pound, 11-ounce fish. Within sight of these anglers, Cliff Webb was enjoying similar success, but not quite.

Webb's *not quite* experience would best by far a thousand anglers' fishing trips of a lifetime. What occurred that dreary day is more than most of us dare dream of finding. But that is OK. Just knowing it happened keeps me focused and hopeful during the second month of each new year, even when conditions don't match those of that historic day a decade ago.

It helps to have Webb beside me to maintain intensity and enthusiasm. Even better to have two Webbs along on those methodical marches.



Cliff Webb (left) and his son C.R. Webb try to decide which Corky to try next during a wade-fishing expedition for trout along the King Ranch shoreline.

Typically around here, February trophy seekers concentrate their efforts in or near Baffin Bay. True, the floor in sections of this bay has what it takes to draw big trout from their deeper winter hideaways. But the tide's still brown down south, and we have alternatives that hold promise — minus the mystique.

The King Ranch shoreline is the new Baffin Bay, with its miles of waist-deep water, intermittent, dark, soft bottoms and patchy seagrass. It even has rocks, if you're looking for Baffin-like structure.

Reports from rank amateurs, guides and their clients have featured handsome rewards during chilly wades. I'm sure the reports that reached my ears represent only a fraction of successes found. Secrets outweigh revelations surrounding trophy waters this time of year, as anglers attempt to conceal their good fortunes from fellow thrill seekers.

Please see **SIKES 15C**

■ South Texas Guideline, vektor tables **15C**

LEFT: This eight-pounder was the second heaviest caught in two days of fishing during the first week of this month. It was fooled by a *MirrOLure Catch 5* suspending plug.



David Sikes/Caller-Times

Who says winter trout are sluggish? This one put on a spectacular surface display before surrendering to the hand of Cliff Webb.

SIKES From 10C

I'll tell you this. A handful of really big trout have been caught in some of the most nondescript stretches of King Ranch shoreline south of the Pure Oil Channel.

And I am aware of none caught from a boat in February. You might find an occasional wall-hanger without wading here. But to claim that you've truly explored the possibilities thoroughly, you must be prepared to spend time sheathed in a pair of waders. Water temperatures were in the 50s this past week.

As for lure preference, I've seen February fatties caught with soft plastics, soft suspending baits and more recently with the new Mirrolure Catch 5, a hard, broad, slow-sinking plug. It's likely natural baits would be a sure bet now, but most mud marchers prefer hardware for the sport of it.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES

If you're still interested, you should know that anglers who enjoy the greatest and most consistent success this time of year tend to use an approach that most of us would find excruciating, mentally and physically. For starters, they define success differently. Three to five bites might be a good day if one of those bites were to yield a fish that nears or surpasses a personal best.

Others might prefer a pace with slightly more action, even if this means fish are closer to the three- to five-pound range. Don't expect to find a mess of keeper trout fishing this way. Small trout would be at the bottom of the food chain in these waters.

And don't do what I do, that is try to cover too much water too quickly. Think of yourself as an almost stationary piling or a patient bird. Become part of the scenery. Webb believes that big trout migrate sluggishly to these dark shorelines as the sun rises, following warmth and baitfish.

Don't think of your wade so much a search for trout, but rather as a stake out for prowling predators. As such, you might spend three hours or more without venturing much more than 100 yards, often concentrating your efforts in an even smaller area.

To do this effectively requires more than just going through the motions of casting and retrieving. You must be confident that each cast could produce a fish worthy of such effort.

MORE THAN LUCK

Trouble is, for most of us such confidence comes only from proof. And proof this rare hardly ever is the result of luck.

To illustrate this, I'll let Webb describe why he did what he did on a recent outing.

Several points along the King Ranch shoreline become winter feeding areas for big trout, but not all at the same time. Conditions change. A good start on your search is to target the subtle points and coves. When I say coves, I'm not talking about an obvious inlet surrounded on three sides by land. In most cases, a King Ranch cove is nothing more than a slight bite in the shore, which usually is the result of a section of bank that has eroded a little more than the shoreline on either side.

And because of this erosion, a cove might sport a slightly softer bottom, shallower depth and therefore hold warmer water than the surrounding bay. In our case, the tide was falling and the wind was from the west (another myth dispelled), pushing the cove's warmer water into the cooler depths

farther from shore.

This warm-water push invites baitfish to the cove and, in turn, predator fish follow. A contoured bottom, scattered rocks and a layer of rotting sea-grass near the floor added ambush structure to the mix of factors that made this an attractive spot.

OTHER FACTORS

Of course, reasons unknown came into play, not the least of which was Webb's intuitive gut feeling that comes from experience. Even he can't always explain this.

But his rationale for targeting that particular stretch of shoreline that day is worth noting, because of the results. By 9:30 a.m., Webb, his son, C.R. and longtime client Greg Woodard of Houston had caught 17 trout, 14 of which measured 25 inches or better, including two 29s and a 30-incher that weighed about 8-

4, which Woodard left with taxidermist John Glenn.

We returned the next day and caught another eight-pounder.

Outdoors writer David Sikes' column appears Thursdays and Sundays. Contact him at 886-3616 or sikesd@caller.com