

# OUTDOORS

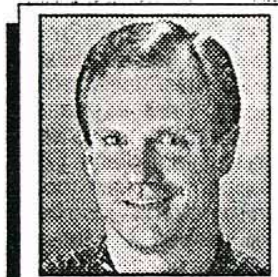
Recreational Sports

Fishing report, 12B  
Running Notebook, 13B  
Cycling Notebook, 13B

## The serious side of the search for trophy trout

Good things, and giant speckled trout, come to those who wait.

Monday afternoon, standing around the Caney Creek Marina dock after a few hours drifting on East Matagorda Bay with friends, I caught a glimpse across the parking lot of an enormous trout being tucked back into an ice chest.



**Outdoors**  
Doug Pike

The angler didn't want to draw attention to himself, he said. Sorry, I said, but you can't haul out a 31-inch, 9.45-pound speckled trout along this coast and keep a low profile.

Turns out we knew

each other from way back when, but I promised not to give out any personal information on the guy. And he wouldn't say a word, even off the record, about where he caught that fish. He's convinced there are more where she came from, and he's entered in the TroutMasters tournament there (officially the American Rodsmiths Matagorda Open) this weekend.

Fair is fair. He worked hard for that fish and for any more he

yanks from the same spot. The little bit of information he did divulge, however, is enough to improve anyone's chances at a trophy-class speck.

"Those fish have been there all winter," he said. "I stayed pretty much in the same spot all day. I hardly moved."

That simple statement echoes hundreds I've heard over the years from upper-coast anglers whose collective patience is matched only by their confidence.

The drill down south, in the Laguna Madre, is similar but also sometimes involves a bit of stalking and hunting.

Either way, anywhere along this state's expansive, half-moon coast, trophy-class consistency depends heavily upon those two characteristics.

A tough pill for the average angler to swallow is that bragging-sized trout are only rarely found hanging out with smaller fish, except maybe to eat them.

Anglers with reasonable experience in Texas bays have all seen some "pretty good" specks plucked from schools of schoolies.

If their recollections were full-on accurate, however, they probably would remember those trout as being 26 or 27 inches long, not 30, and weighing five or six pounds, not crowding 10.

There is a monumental difference

between a good fish made to look better by laying beside a dozen marginal keepers and a broad-tailed rogue of a sow that like some personal space around herself and strikes violently at finned trespassers.

Between one and the other are the longest two or three inches and the heaviest three or four pounds in coastal fishing.

This month and next are opportune times to chase these upper-end fish. Evidence abounds. Beyond that Matagorda speck, there also was a 10-plus taken recently from Galveston's West Bay, and yet another double-digit fish was caught in Sabine Lake about two weeks ago.

I haven't heard from any of the aces prowling Baffin Bay this month, but it's an even-money bet that more than a few jumbo trout have been brought to hand down there during the new year.

In a nutshell, catching a "28-plus" on purpose is mostly a matter of eliminating 99 percent of the water around you, funneling every cast into that 1 percent where a big trout should be, and forever resisting the temptation of more but certainly smaller specks elsewhere.

Hard as it may be for the rest of us to do, big-trout specialists such as that Matagorda man often stand in the same two footprints all morning.

Instinct and experience determine the location of such a static assault. A 30-inch speckled trout goes wherever it wants to go, of course, but that brand of fish has preferences and tendencies that can be exploited by observant anglers.

First order of business in a serious trophy search should be to concentrate on shoreline flats and coves, summarily writing off areas that offer no immediate access to a relatively deep cut.

Those channels need not be particularly deep, but they should be reasonably defined and, from a trout's perspective, permanently navigable.

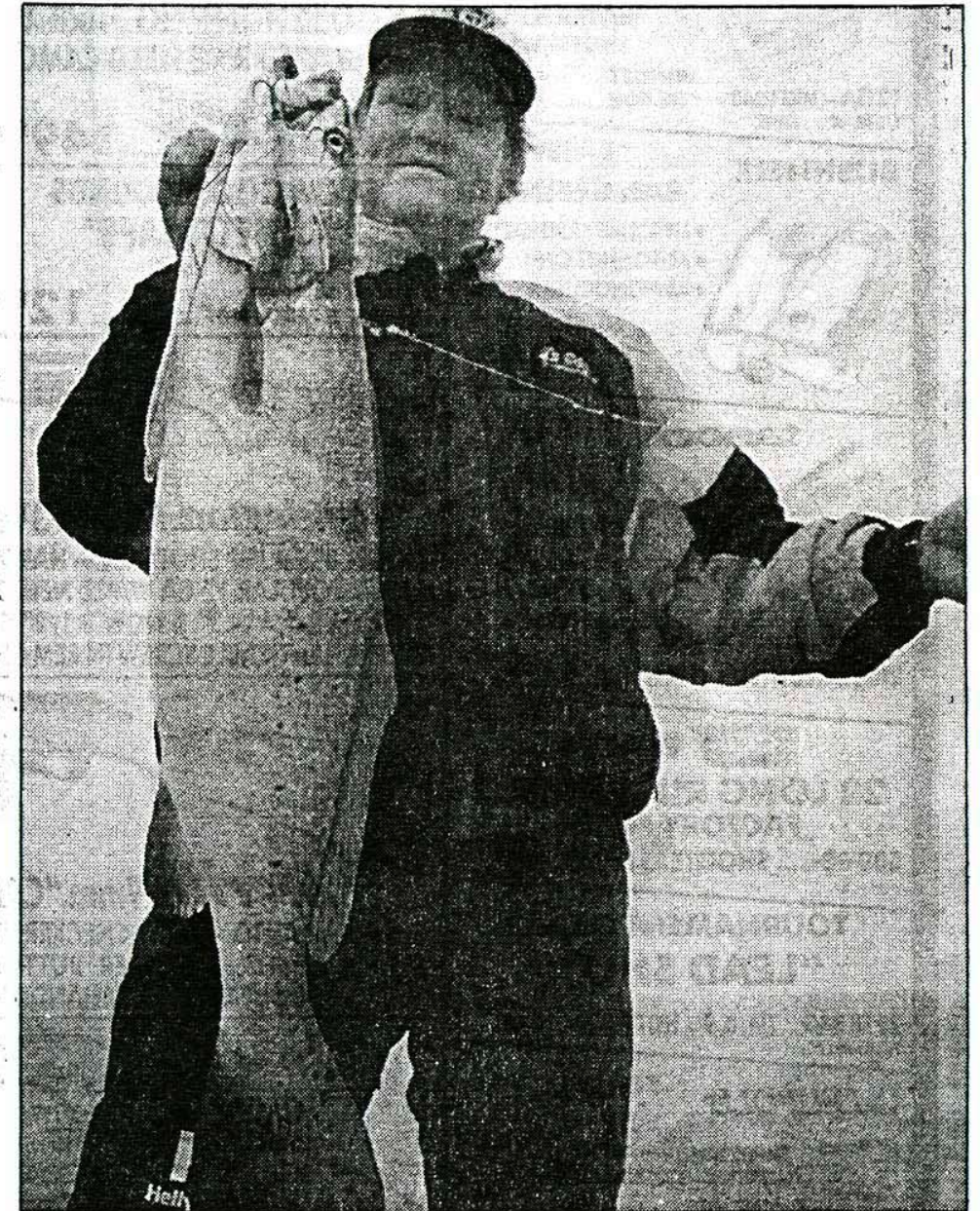
These are escape routes noted for use should a sudden, brutal norther knock temperatures for a loop and blow all the water off the flat or out of the cove.

They can be extremely subtle gouges on an otherwise featureless bottom; wading, you might barely notice the undulation.

To a speckled trout, however, even a few inches of extra depth can mean the difference between life and death. Trout that live long enough to crowd 30 inches know how to avoid getting trapped by winter weather.

Among those few favorable flats and coves, try to locate areas

See PIKE on Page 12B.



Doug Pike / Chronicle

Patience, confidence and stealth are required of anglers seeking giant trout, such as this 31-inch Baffin Bay speck held by guide Cliff Webb.



# Pike

Continued from Page 11B.

where the bottom is darker than elsewhere.

In shallow water, oyster shell, vegetation and even mud absorb just the least bit more bright sunshine than bare, light-colored sand, which tends to be more reflective.

That extra degree or two of warmth over dark structure can be enough to attract and hold baitfish, which draws the predators.

Once a potential trophy trout hangout is selected, it is critical that the spot be approached quietly. Interviews with several big-trout specialists along this coast confirmed as much. I recall speaking with one man who said he killed his outboard a full quarter-mile from favorite fishing spots, then either drifted or poled his small boat within comfortable wad-

ing distance.

Which brings up another key point: Your chances of catching a lifetime speckled trout increase tremendously with the first steps away from the boat. Hull slap and a high profile both work against flats anglers intent on getting a shot at a giant speck.

Excessive movement while wading, especially over shell, is every bit as detrimental to the cause. You pick your spot, the pros say, then camp there.

The only time I have caught monster specks from the boat was on a rare day several years ago, in Baffin Bay. There was absolutely no wind, and air was thick with fog. Guide Cliff Webb and I racked up two dozen trout heavier than eight pounds in two hours.

Five of those fish were longer than 30 inches, and the longest was 32 inches. If I didn't have photographs, I wouldn't believe it myself. I have yet to repeat that perfor-

mance, even in dreams.

Galveston Bay guide James Plaag and I talked recently about big-trout tactics in West Bay, and his thoughts were no different than those of any other top angler with whom I've discussed the topic.

"You've got to be willing to just stand there and cast all day for maybe one or two bites," Plaag said. "Most people can't do that."

And they never will, which is why so few people ever catch a legitimate 30-inch speck.

This is the coastal equivalent of home-run derby, an all-or-nothing shot at a single fish guaranteed, like it or not around the docks, to turn heads.

To win this game, to eventually get that beast of a trout, fishermen must accept hundreds of empty swings along the way.

*Doug Pike covers the outdoors for the Chronicle. His column appears on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays.*