

GAME & FISH

SOUTH

The Regional Outdoor Guide

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POST-RUT GAME PLAN

DON'T END THE SEASON
WITH AN **UNPUNCHED TAG**

PLUS: TIPS FOR STAYING
WARM ON STAND

JIGGING TACTICS FOR
COLD-WEATHER **BASS**

HOGS: SPOT-AND-STALK
YOUR **CHRISTMAS HAM**

FAVORITE WINTER
REDFISH HIDEOUTS

BLUE RIDGE, GA:
THE PERFECT HOLIDAY
FISHING ROAD TRIP

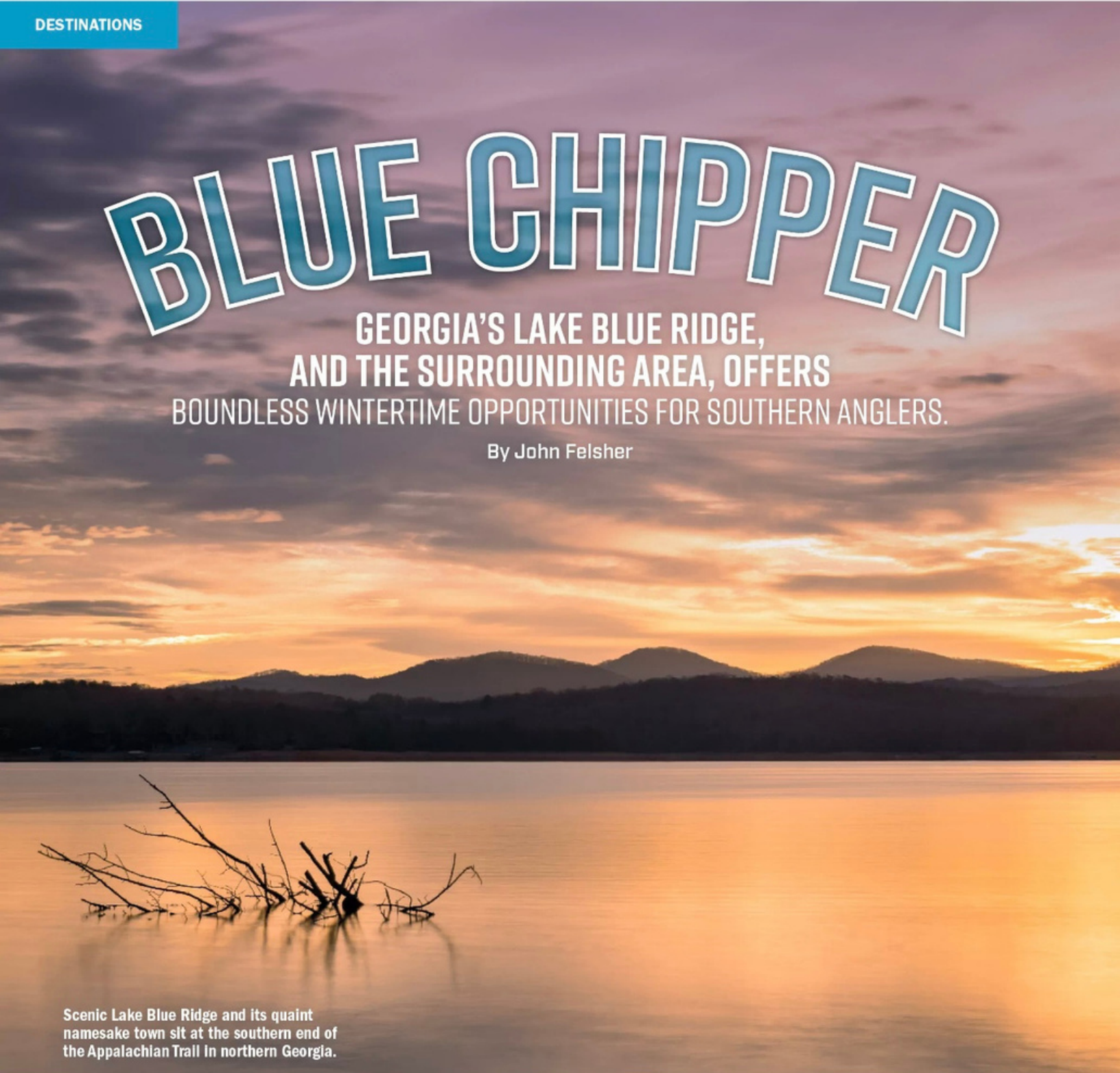
REGION ROUNDUP

- CAJUN TROUT
- OKLAHOMA QUAIL
- FLORIDA BOWFISHING
- ALABAMA PEAK RUT
- TEXAS URBAN CATFISH

BLUE CHIPPER

GEORGIA'S LAKE BLUE RIDGE,
AND THE SURROUNDING AREA, OFFERS
BOUNDLESS WINTERTIME OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOUTHERN ANGLERS.

By John Felsher



Scenic Lake Blue Ridge and its quaint namesake town sit at the southern end of the Appalachian Trail in northern Georgia.

Blue Ridge, Ga., in Fannin County is nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains about 75 miles north of Atlanta. The area boasts stunning mountain views, Appalachian hiking trails, waterfalls, wineries, boutique shops and galleries. Just a short drive from South Carolina, and bordering both Tennessee and North Carolina, Blue Ridge's claim to fame is that it's the "Trout Capital of Georgia." While certainly a top Southern trout des-

tinuation, the area offers many other excellent fishing opportunities ranging from bass to panfish to walleyes.

BIG BLUE

Lake Blue Ridge is the epicenter for anglers visiting the area. The crystal-clear, aquamarine waters average about 100 feet deep but drop to more than 240 feet in places.

"Lake Blue Ridge is in the mountains," says John Damer, the senior fisheries

biologist overseeing northwestern Georgia. "So, naturally, it's very deep with sheer, steep banks. It's dotted with many small coves and is dominated by plenty of rock structure, with some fish attractors placed in the lake by the department [of natural resources]."

The 3,300-acre lake was formed by a dam built across the Toccoa River in 1930 by the Toccoa Electric Power Company. The Toccoa flows out of the mountains to the northwest. At the



The Chattahoochee National Forest, which surrounds much of Lake Blue Ridge, is home to some of the finest trout streams in the South.

Tennessee state line, the river's name changes to the Ocoee River, which flows into the Hiwassee River, a tributary of the Tennessee River.

Lake Blue Ridge offers anglers largemouth, smallmouth and spotted bass (often called Alabama bass). The lake also holds white bass, yellow perch, crappies, walleyes, trout, bluegills, red-breast sunfish and various other sunfish species. There are channel catfish and huge flatheads as well.

JOHN FELSHER

Bass

"The most popular sportfish in the lake is Alabama bass," Damer says. "Lake Blue Ridge was the last stronghold for smallmouth bass in Georgia, but after Alabama bass were introduced illegally in the mid-1990s, they started to take over the lake and interbreed with smallmouths. When Alabama bass hybridize with smallmouths, the smallmouth genes disappear over time."

Alabama bass tend to stay in deeper,

open waters around humps and ledges, where they chase baitfish. Any lure that imitates a wounded shad, like a jerkbait or crankbait, works on Alabama bass.

"Winter is a great time to catch bass on the lake," says Barron Adams, a professional bass angler from Mineral Bluff, Ga. "In December, we use reaction baits, like jerkbaits. We catch a lot of fish between 2 to 15 feet deep at that time of year. The lake also has some 8- to 9-pound largemouths."

Walleyes

Primarily a northern species, walleyes like cold, deep, clear water. They eat yellow perch and other small fish. Blueback herring appeared in Lake Blue Ridge a few years ago and provide excellent, protein-rich forage for walleyes, bass and other species. Walleyes traditionally spawn in Lake Blue Ridge from February to April. In December and January, they stage in the mouths of tributaries where they can be tempted with crankbaits, jerkbaits, jigs, spoons, live baitfish and nightcrawlers.

“In December and January, we concentrate on catching walleyes and yellow perch,” says Eric Crowley with Lake and Stream Guide Service (lakeandstreamguideservice.com) in Ellijay, Ga. “They usually stay on the points in 30 to 60 feet of water at that time. When we find them on the sonar, we vertically fish a spoon or a jig really slowly. Walleyes average about 5 pounds, but you’ll occasionally come across a big fish in the 10-pound range.”

In the summer, walleyes typically stay in the deep water, about 30 to 50 feet deep, and mostly feed at night. The Tennessee Valley Authority begins drawing down the lake level after Labor Day. By early December, the water drops 20 to 22 feet below summer pool, and the lake shrinks by a total of 500 to 600 acres.



Lake Blue Ridge's waters are cold and deep enough to support a robust walleye population.



The lake holds good numbers—and large specimens—of spotted bass, crappies and numerous other species.

The annual Light Up Blue Ridge event kicks off the holiday season in the northern Georgia mountain town.



WHILE YOU'RE THERE

The Blue Ridge area offers something for every family member.

When you're not on the water, there's no shortage of things to keep you busy in northern Georgia. The Chattahoochee National Forest offers hunting when in season as well as camping, hiking, biking and other recreational activities. Morganton Point Campground, on forest service land, is a popular spot.

The Appalachian Trail begins in Fannin County, as does the Benton MacKaye Trail. A scenic train leaves from downtown Blue Ridge and follows the Toccoa River to the twin towns of McCaysville, Ga., and Copperhill, Tenn. A big, blue line runs right through the middle of town, marking the boundary between the two states. The train runs from early March to Dec. 31.

Blue Ridge holds several special community events throughout the year. These include the Fire & Ice Chili Cook Off and Craft Beer Festival in February and the Blue Ridge Trout and Outdoor Adventures Festival in April. The big fall event, Light Up Blue Ridge, kicks off the Christmas festivities after Thanksgiving. Numerous restaurants offer a variety of foods. I recommend the Toccoa Riverside restaurant overlooking the Toccoa River (toccoariversiderestaurant.com).

For lodging, there are more than 2,600 cabins of all sizes in the area. These range from 1-bedroom cabins to 9-bedroom lodges, with some even equipped with helicopter pads. For the particularly adventurous, visit Tank Town USA (tanktownusa.com), where you can drive a tank to crush cars and shoot machine guns.

Yellow Perch

Yellow perch, a walleye relative, can grow up to 20 inches long and weigh more than 4 pounds. However, most Blue Ridge perch weigh less than a pound. The Georgia state record is 2 pounds, 9 ounces.

“Walleye and perch mix together,” Crowley says. “We target perch all over

percent of Lake Blue Ridge, offers anglers more than 1,360 miles of trout streams.

TOCCOA RIVER AND OTHERS

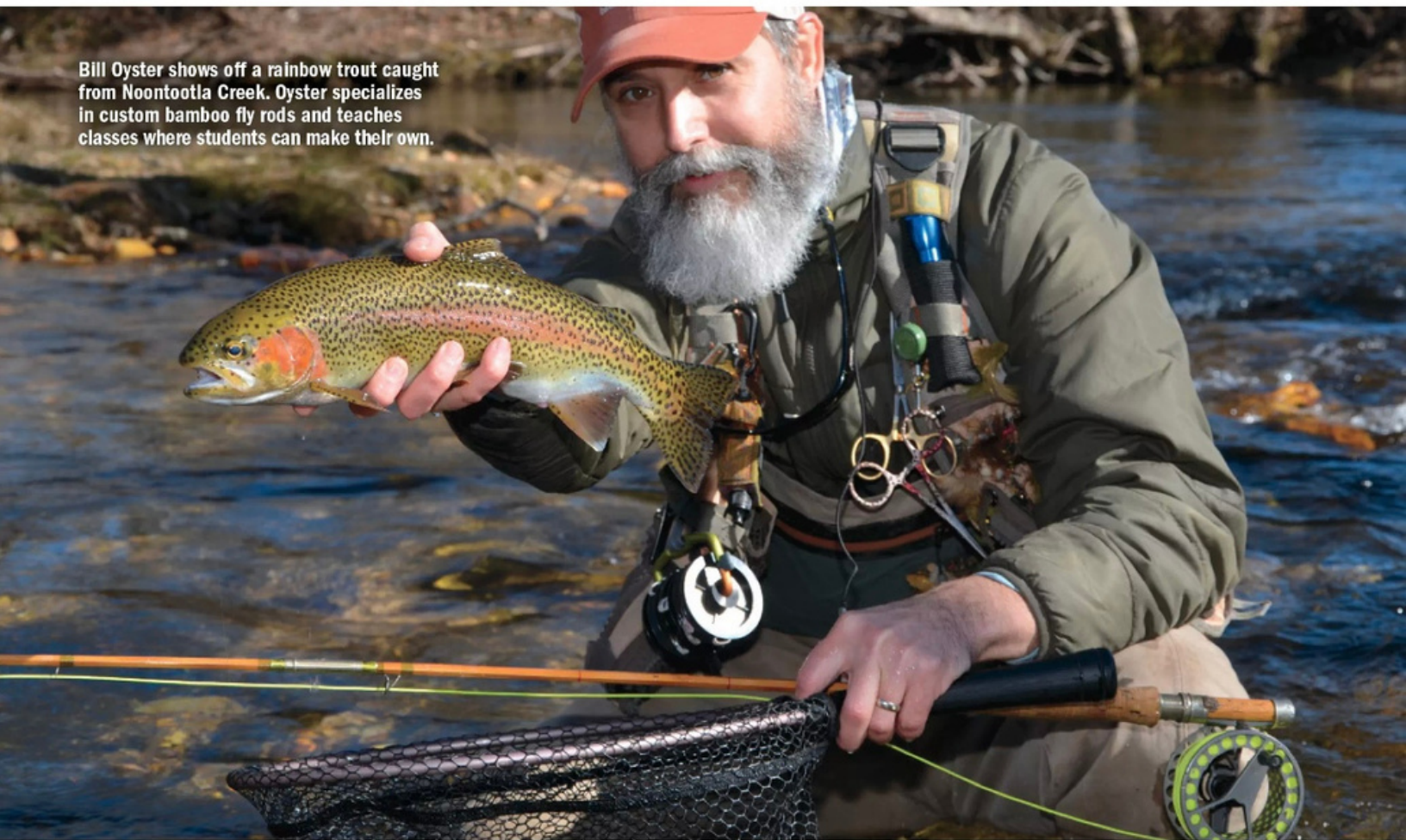
The state heavily stocks the Toccoa River and many other streams in the area with rainbow trout. While rainbows dominate the trout population in the rivers, some browns grow particularly large. The river

Anglers can even build their own custom fly rod in Blue Ridge under the tutelage of Bill Oyster with Oyster Fine Bamboo Fly Rods (oysterbamboo.com).

CARTERS LAKE

Carters Lake, about 25 miles away on the Coosawattee River near Ellijay, was created by the tallest earthen dam east

Bill Oyster shows off a rainbow trout caught from Noontootla Creek. Oyster specializes in custom bamboo fly rods and teaches classes where students can make their own.



the lake with minnows on a No. 2 or No. 4 hook with a split-shot. We'll drop the bait to the bottom when we see them on the sonar. A big perch here is about 15 to 16 inches long.”

Trout

Rainbow trout entered the lake naturally from the upper Toccoa River and its tributaries.

“We catch big rainbow trout in the lake by trolling with downriggers in 60 to 90 feet of water,” Crowley says. “The biggest rainbow we’ve ever caught in the lake weighed 6 1/2 pounds.”

Additionally, the Chattahoochee National Forest, which surrounds 80

has produced brown trout exceeding 15 pounds in the past.

“Above and below the dam, the Toccoa River is very popular with trout fishermen,” Damer says. “The Toccoa tailwater downstream of the dam is probably better known because it has public access in a lot of areas. That section of the river has some big rainbows and browns.”

Some landowners manage private fisheries to produce trophy trout. Part of Noontootla Creek runs through Noontootla Creek Farms before it hits the Toccoa River. The farm offers trophy trout fishing as well as quail hunting, and it occasionally hosts Women on the Water retreats.

of the Mississippi River. The mountain lake covers 3,200 acres and drops to more than 450 feet deep. It holds striped bass, walleyes and Alabama bass among others.

“Carters Lake is a great spotted bass fishery,” Crowley says. “In fact, the average spotted bass there is a bit bigger than on Lake Blue Ridge.”

When fishing Carter, expect to find an overabundance of timber. Weedless bait designs work best.

No matter where you choose to fish in the Blue Ridge area, or what species you wish to pursue, you are guaranteed to see some of the most pristine and beautiful landscapes in all of the South. 