

## Fishing or Catching?

### Tips for Redbreast Sunfish

by Mark Williams, Satilla Outdoors

The Satilla River is a Southeast Georgia icon. As it winds its way 260 miles through a dozen counties, it leaves a trail of unsurpassed beauty. The blackwater river draws thousands of visitors each year to partake in the recreation it provides.

The excellent fishing, of course, is its biggest draw. Whether the angler is pursuing sporty largemouth bass, tasty channel catfish, or big bull bluegill, the Satilla rarely disappoints. But there is one fish that stands out as King of the Satilla: the colorful and feisty redbreast.

Usually beginning in March and continuing into the Fall of each year, the red-bellied sunfish is a highly sought after prize. Ounce for ounce, the big mature males, aka “roosters,” are possibly the toughest fighters in the river. Few things bring the same level of excitement on the water as having a big rooster redbreast on the end of ultralight tackle.

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The redbreast bite is better nowhere else than in the Satilla, but even here many factors contribute to one's success: Currently, the river level is close to flood stage but is dropping quickly. When the river is out of the banks, the fish are fattening up in the floodplains. Once the river recedes within the banks (I

like it around 6' at the Waycross gauge) and the water temperature heats up close to 70 degrees, the bite will be on! May and June tend to be stellar months.

Redbreast tend to like moving water. I look for current with cover, such as the back side of limbs and rocks. You can also find them hanging out in deep holes on either side of the sandbars--the holes that make you say, “There has to be a fish in there!”

As far as bait goes, there are many choices that can land you a big ole redbelly. Probably the most common method is a cricket suspended a couple of feet below a bobber. But in heavily fished areas, big fish can become bobber-shy. When using live bait, I prefer to toss a red wiggler on the bottom. I don't use much weight, maybe a BB sinker 6" above the hook with a free-sliding 1/8 oz egg sinker above the BB shot. Be sure to have a good supply of hooks and sinkers on hand when using this method as hang-ups are common when fishing where the fish are. But the reward can be worth the extra tackle!

Another effective way of hooking into a hungry rooster is by using small spinner-type baits, such as Beetle Spins and Satilla Spins. Both come in a variety and sizes and colors. Be sure to have a good mixture of both and test what they are liking that day. Probably the most exciting way to catch



Team Stumpknockers took home the Redbreast Stringer prize in the Satilla Riverkeeper's 2018 “King of the River” Fishing Tournament, for a 3-fish stringer weighing in at 1.82 pounds. (Pictured: the late Glen Solomon and Mark Williams.)

redbreast is with topwater baits like popping bugs and Swamp Spiders. Whip one of these baits in the right spot with a fiberglass bugging pole or fly rod and then wiggle it with a little life. When the Big Boy is there, he'll hit hard! The pull will test your equipment and the fight is a blast!

During the summer months, dry conditions can cause the river level to get so low that motorboats can have difficulty navigating the shallow and narrow waterway. This is a great time to go after the fish in a kayak. These small shallow-draft crafts are often a perfect way to get on plenty of fishing action as they are stealthy and can go where larger boats cannot.

Speaking of good action, on a good day of fishing, I may catch 50 fish but will usually only bring home a dozen or so. There's no need to feel obligated to keep each redbreast you catch. My practice is to keep what I need for a good meal and return the rest to grow and breed. We have a great resource in our spectacular Satilla River. We should all do our part to keep it that way so that our kids and grandkids can have the same enjoyment of the river that we are now blessed with.

Mark Williams is an outdoor enthusiast, Satilla Riverkeeper member, and founder of Satilla Outdoors, a Facebook group that celebrates and promotes outdoor recreation. Members share experiences and ask questions concerning hunting, fishing, camping, and all things outdoors in Southeast Georgia.



### “King of the River” Satilla Tournament Largest Redbreast

2016	1.20 lbs	2018	0.71 lbs
2017	0.70 lbs	2019	1.11 lbs