# Flint River, GA

## Native Bass in Native Waters

*By Nick Carter*

Watching Kent Edmonds sneak through stands of tall green vegetation strongly suggests a heron on the hunt. His physical appearance certainly warrants the comparison. With a light blue shirt over a lean frame and a gray ponytail feathered behind a beak-like ball cap, he kind of resembles a great blue heron.

And there's also the way he moves. Each step is deliberate. He draws his boot high to clear the matted grass before extending it slowly forward and down, seeking purchase in the silt. Only then does his torso advance into a lean that anchors his footing for another high step. With a smooth rocking motion, his progress is slow, but efficient and stealthy. The silt plumes from his footsteps dissipate quickly downstream. They are the only signs of his passage.

All the while, Edmonds watches the water ahead, seeking his next target. Of course, he already knows where the fish are likely to be. West Georgia's Flint River has been his home water for more than 30 years. In a 45-mile stretch of river that straddles a geologic feature known as the Georgia fall line, he probably has each set of shoals mentally cataloged.

The fall line is a transition zone. It separates the rolling hills and red clay of the piedmont from the flat sandy expanse of the coastal plain. The coastline of an ancient sea, it cuts a 20-mile-wide swath of rapid elevation loss that bisects the state east to west.

*A view of the Flint River from the overlook at Sprewell Bluff Park shows an extensive set of publicly accessible shoals and wadable water for anglers.*



For rivers in the distant past, the fall line was a final rapid descent to the ocean. Today, the elevation change provides perfect habitat for a bass species that evolved to fill this niche in this drainage. Here, the Flint River is wide, warm, shallow, and shoal-broken. It is the best place in the world to fish for shoal bass in their native waters.

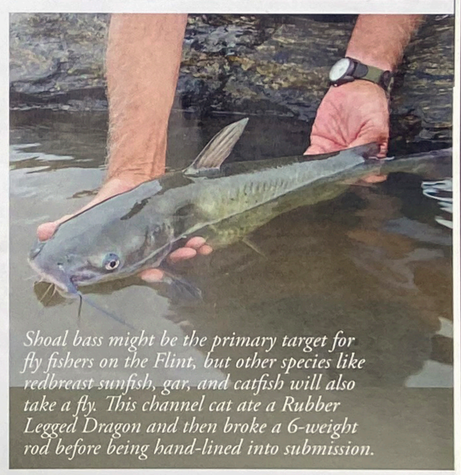
### Pioneering a Fishery

Edmonds first met shoal bass when he moved to west Georgia in the late 1980s. With his family, he purchased a gift shop, and the work took him away from the trout he grew up chasing in the mountains of the Carolinas. "I moved down here, and of course I had the fly-rod bug, but there weren't any trout," he says. "I started fishing West Point Lake. That was better than not fishing, but it wasn't like moving water."

Like any good trout angler of the time, Edmonds studied his DeLorme *Georgia Atlas & Gazetteer* and started riding the roads to scout creeks for catching bream and river bass.

"I went over the bridge one day on the Flint, and, man, I couldn't believe my eyes," he says. "It looked like North Carolina or Virginia. This was before the internet and before the shoal bass officially was a species. I didn't know anything about it, except that the water was pretty, and it looked more like a trout stream than it did like a central Georgia river. So I grabbed a fly rod, Woolly Buggers, and some big stoneflies, and started fishing. I caught some redbreast, caught these bass that—I don't know—I didn't know what they were. But I was hooked."

*Kent Edmonds shows off a chunky shoal bass prior to release.*



*Shoal bass might be the primary target for fly fishers on the Flint, but other species like redbreast sunfish, gar, and catfish will also take a fly. This channel cat ate a Rubber Legged Dragon and then broke a 6-weight rod before being hand-lined into submission.*

Locals at the time called the bass "Flint River bass" or just "river bass." Science still classified them as a subspecies of redeye bass, but everyone knew these fish were different from the little redeyes of Alabama's Coosa River system. They grow much larger than redeyes, and fight harder, which made shoal bass a favorite of local anglers long before they were officially recognized as a separate species in 1999.

Shoalies are one of the earlier entries on a growing list of recently identified bass species in the South. Over the last couple of decades, the scientific community has rushed to identify and preserve native fish in our nation's river systems. In the South, black bass of the *Micropterus* genus are a focal point. Familiar fish like largemouth and smallmouth bass are the stars of the genus, but almost every system has a bass that evolved in isolation. Biologists have identified 10 separate species of black bass in Georgia waters. Several of them are fantastic targets for fly anglers, especially the shoal-loving river species, which are particularly well suited to our style of fishing.

Shoal bass are the heavyweights of the river bass species. They prefer shallows, and shoals in swift water, where they swing out of eddies to hammer popping bugs and streamers. They feed aggressively, like all the little bass that fill the shoal niche in different river systems, but shoal bass are not little. While most shoal-loving Southeastern bass top out at about 16 inches, shoal bass grow to 24 inches. They are girthy and strong, with record weights approaching 9 pounds.

Edmonds advises bringing at least a 6-weight down to Thomaston, Georgia, to cast the large wind-resistant or heavy flies shoalies prefer, and to handle fish of 2 or 3 pounds or heavier.

On an overcast and unseasonably cool day for late August in Georgia, I watched Edmonds play a nice shoal bass of perhaps 14 inches. It ran him all over a pocket between grassy shoals, bulldogging and tail-walking. Even after decades spent with these fish, a broad grin broke across his face when he turned to show me a fat and healthy chunk of a bass.

## Stealth Bomber

**Hook:** Gamakatsu B10S, size 2–6

**Thread:** Bright orange, size 3/0

**Tail:** Bucktail and Krystal Flash (colors to suit)

**Body/wing:** 2 mm foam, cut to shape

**Dubbing:** Sparkle chenille

**Underwing:** Flashabou

**Legs:** Medium barred round rubber

*In central Georgia a 20-mile-wide swath of elevation loss bisects the state east to west. Around this geologic feature, known as the fall line, the Flint is characterized by long stretches of rocky shoals that are perfect for wading and for shoal bass.*

*Guide Kent Edmonds first encountered Flint River shoal bass in the late 1980s. Since then, he has been a regular in the river's shoals and has introduced the species to countless fly anglers.*

Fish like this are the standard that makes the Flint such a fun river. In a day that featured sight-casting to a 3-foot gar and a channel catfish that broke a 6-weight rod before being hand-lined to submission, the feisty native bass were the highlight. They are a big part of the progression that led Edmonds to take up guiding full-time. He won't admit it, but he is largely responsible for putting fly fishing for shoal bass on the map.

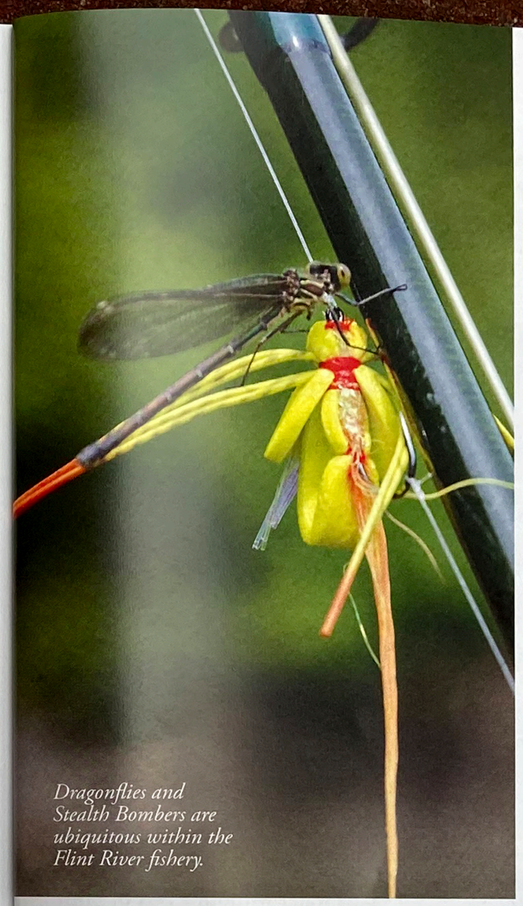
In the late 1980s, few fly anglers plied the waters of rural west Georgia, and no one was guiding the Flint River. While local spinning-gear fishers pulled up large clumps of river moss to search for hellgrammites to use as bait, Edmonds experimented with different trout and bass flies. He also ran a jet boat on the lower Chattahoochee River for striped bass over on the Alabama border.

In the early '90s, he hooked up with renowned angler, fly tier, and writer Carter Nelson, who ran the fly-fishing program at Callaway Gardens, a 2,500-acre luxury resort in nearby Pine Mountain, Georgia. Edmonds learned a lot about warm-water fly fishing on the ponds at Callaway. He started guiding part-time, both at the resort and on the Flint and Chattahoochee. "At that point, of course, there was nobody down here to guide the Flint. Nobody'd ever heard of the Flint. I kinda had the market to myself," he recalls.

After about a decade of running his shop and moonlighting as a guide, Edmonds had what he called his midlife crisis and jumped into guiding full-time. This was in 2000, just after biologists had officially described the shoal bass and sparked a new interest in the species. Edmonds was in the right place with the right knowledge to introduce shoal bass to the fly-fishing world.

"Within the last 10 years, there's certainly been a lot more awareness of these fish. When I first started guiding, most people had never heard of them, and I guess technically when I first started guiding they weren't called shoal bass," Edmonds says. "Over the last five years, I've gotten calls from all over the country from people who want to come fish shoal bass."





*Dragonflies and Stealth Bombers are ubiquitous within the Flint River fishery.*

*Shoal bass weren't recognized as a distinct species until 1999. They are a great sport fish, native only to the Southeast's Apalachicola–Chattahoochee–Flint River basin.*

*Shoalies are celebrated for aggressive takes and spirited fights. Here, Kent Edmonds applies heavy pressure to turn a fish's head away from the current.*

### Shoal Bass and the Flint

If the sporting nature of shoal bass isn't enough to pique angler interest in the fishery, there's also the novelty that these are unique fish, found only in this small slice of the world. Shoalies are native only to the Apalachicola–Chattahoochee–Flint River basin. The highest headwaters of the drainage, where the Chattahoochee River begins in the mountains of northeast Georgia, are trout water. The Chattahoochee is the system's largest flow. It runs south and west through numerous impoundments to form the Georgia–Alabama border for hundreds of miles before meeting the Flint at Lake Seminole. The combined rivers enter Florida as the Apalachicola River.

There is a stretch of excellent unspoiled native shoal bass water on the Chattahoochee upstream of its first major impoundment at Lake Lanier. Aside from that, extensive damming after the 1940s dramatically altered the river's habitat. Angler introduction of nonnative bass species muddied the genetic waters with crossbreeding.

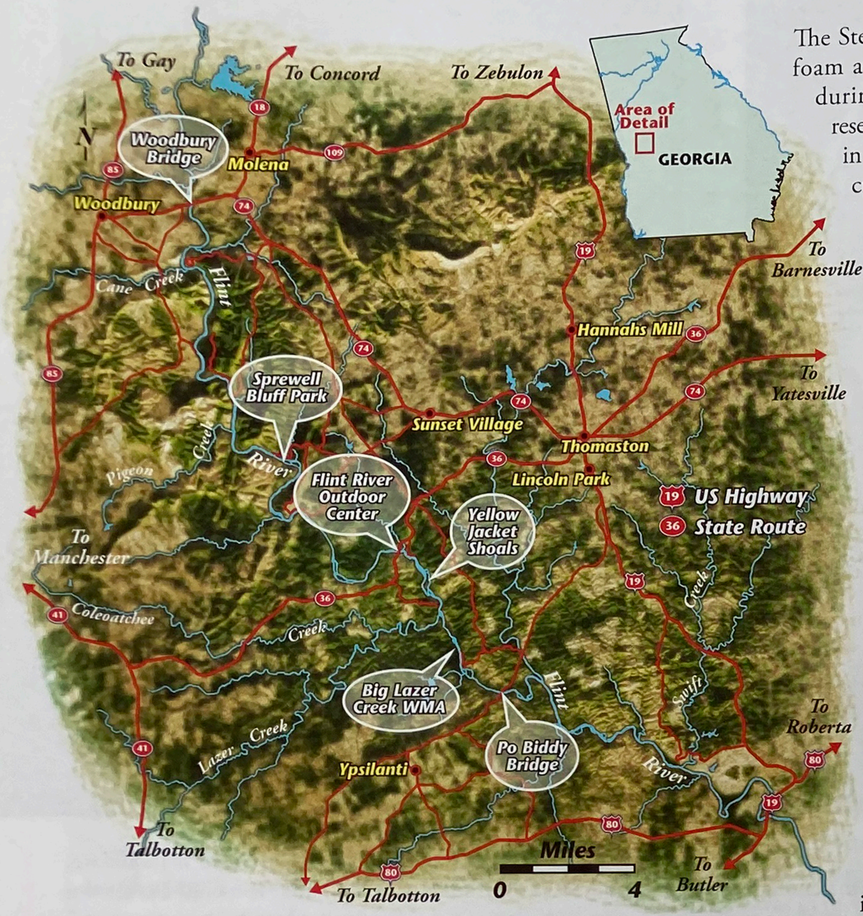
"The Chattahoochee is a mess of hybridization except upstream of Lanier," says Steve Sammons, a research scientist at Auburn University.

Still, the Chattahoochee is a world-class fishery for a variety of species, including pure-strain shoal bass. Shoalies were also introduced to Georgia's Ocmulgee River, where they are not native. That leaves the upper Flint River as the largest unaltered native stronghold for the species.

"The threat [to the future of shoal bass] is moderate, and that's only because of the Flint. The Flint has shown very little sign of hybridization, at least in the main stem," Sammons says. "It's because of the habitat more than anything else. The habitat is intact."

The upper Flint River is a time capsule. It's as if politicians and engineers gave up on it during the rush to dam the Southeast. There's irony in the river's headwaters flowing through a pipe under the Atlanta airport, because 50 or 60 miles downstream, where the river meanders around the small towns, pine forests, and slick red-dirt roads of west Georgia, the Flint must look much as it did when ancient Eastern Woodland tribes called it Thronateeska, which means "place to pick up flint." The river here braids through wooded islands and mats of tall green vegetation between densely forested banks. As one of Edmonds's clients was amazed to note, it is a place where Spanish moss and mountain laurel coexist.

Numerous ancient fish weirs still alter the flow through a 220-mile stretch down to the river's first impoundment at Lake Blackshear, northeast of Albany. Like shoals, but too symmetrical to be natural, these V-shaped, stacked-stone structures funneled fish into woven baskets. Prehistoric people undoubtedly trapped shoal bass in their weirs, and those fish existed much as they do today. Sammons says the unaltered state of the Flint and the species' affinity for swift water are the river's saving graces as a shoal




bass fishery. Although invasive spotted bass are present in the Flint River, they do not thrive in the niche ecosystem where shoal bass are endemic.

Before even the Native Americans, shoal bass were likely feeding in the same shoals on the same baitfish, crawfish, hellgrammites, and dragonfly nymphs. Edmonds says shoalies aren't too picky about what they eat: "They're black bass, right? So they'll eat pretty much anything they can fit in their mouths."

## The Flies

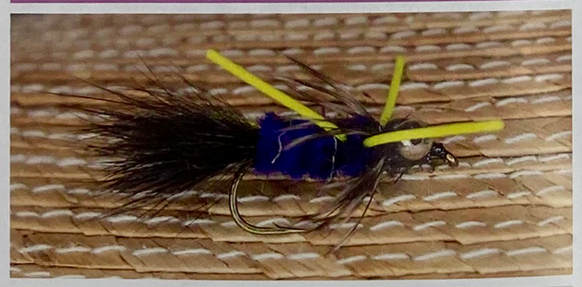
"If I'm catching them on top water, I'm not about to change" is kind of a theme in Edmonds's fishing. He also says, "You tend to catch fish on the flies you fish with, if you're going to catch them at all."

There are two flies that just about every shoal bass angler uses. Both were developed for bream and largemouth bass at Callaway Gardens and later became the go-to shoalie patterns. When Edmonds came to Callaway, Nelson was already tying and fishing his Rubber Legged Dragon, or RLD, a heavy dragonfly nymph effective for most freshwater species. In different colors, sizes, and variations, the RLD is deadly on the Flint, where scads of vibrantly colored dragonflies hum and chase each other over the shoals.

The Stealth Bomber, Edmonds's signature foam attractor pattern, was dreamed up during the Gulf War. Tied in black, it resembled the war machine so prevalent in U.S. culture at the time. Edmonds credits the Turck Tarantula and the Dahlberg Diver as his inspirations for the Stealth Bomber. He brought a handful of Tarantulas home from a trip to Idaho, and they worked well at Callaway. On the ponds, Edmonds stripped the bugs, rather than drifting them, and the spun deer-hair head left a bubble trail like a frog or a diver. Tinkering with foam, Edmonds created his pattern to resemble the Tarantula, except he was going for something more durable. The end result was a diver/slider-style fly that pops and then wiggles and bubbles when it dives.

The RLD and the Stealth Bomber are great flies for any species of bass, but you'd be hard-pressed to find an angler on shoal bass water without a box of both. It might, or might not, be a happy coincidence that the Stealth Bomber is buoyant enough to fish above a small RLD in a dropper rig.

### Carter's Rubber Legged Dragon



**Hook:** Mustad 9671 or similar, sizes 6–8

**Thread:** Black, size 6/0

**Eyes:** Medium gold bead chain

**Tail:** Black or olive rabbit fur

**Body:** Black, purple, or olive medium chenille

**Legs:** Yellow medium round rubber

**Hackle:** Grizzly, slightly oversize

**Head:** Rabbit underfur, dubbed



## Where to Go

There's a sweet spot on the fall line for Flint River fly anglers. Edmonds concentrates on a 45-mile stretch of river between the towns of Gay and Carsonville. This region features the shoals and wadable water that both fly fishers and shoal bass love.

Public access is sparse in the sweet spot, with six access points for anglers fishing from small boats—canoes, kayaks, and rafts. Three of these areas offer walk-up access to good wading water. Long floats are required to reach most of the fishery. Edmonds has river access through private property to a 2.5-mile stretch of shoals where he takes clients. He rarely sees anyone floating through. Even fishing publicly accessible shoals, he says, seeing three or four other anglers in a day is heavy traffic. There's not a lot of fishing pressure.

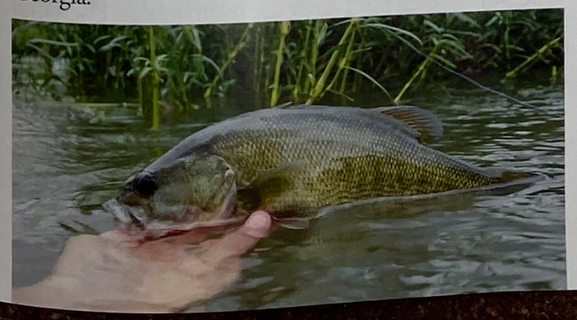
The six established access points, progressing downstream, are Woodbury Bridge (canoe launch at the State Route 74 bridge 2.8 miles east of Woodbury); Sprewell Bluff State Park (boat ramp and wading access to lots of good shoals); the SR 36 bridge, where Flint River Outdoor Center offers canoe rentals, shuttles, and a boat ramp (there is wade-fishing access to a short stretch of shoals); Big Lazer Creek Wildlife Management Area (canoe launch and wading access to lots of good shoals); the Po Biddy bridge (canoe launch on Po Biddy Road 9 miles south of Thomaston); and the US Highway 80–SR 22 bridge (canoe launch 4 miles east of Carsonville).

Such limited access is both good and bad, says Edmonds: "It keeps a lot of people off the water, but there's not a lot of places to go."

Limited access helps preserve such a special place, but needs to be balanced with promotion to users who have a stake in protecting this resource. After all, public outcry from eco-warriors and anglers often spurs preservation and protection of rivers. Currently, the main threats to the Flint River are low flows aggravated by municipalities drawing water from tributaries. According to Sammons, there's likely a correlation between low flows and the spread of spotted bass, which prefer slow water.

"We've really got something; we've just got to make sure we can keep it," says Edmonds. "These are native fish in their native environment. It's never been stocked. The Flint is just an amazing river. It captivated me from that first afternoon when I parked down beside the bridge and fished it. I'd just never seen anything like it. It's pretty rare."

*Nick Carter is a regular contributor to* American Fly Fishing, *and the author of* Flyfishers Guide to North Carolina & Georgia.



*Like any black bass, shoal bass are aggressive feeders. Their willingness to chase down and explode on top-water patterns makes fishing for them a whole lot of fun.*

## Flint River NOTEBOOK

**When:** Year-round; prime time is March–October.

**Where:** Upson County, western GA.

**Headquarters:** Thomaston and Sprewell Bluff Park. *Information*: Upson County–Sprewell Bluff, (706) 647-7012, *www.sprewellbluffpark.com*; Thomaston–Upson Chamber of Commerce, (706) 647-9686, *www.thomastongachamber.com. Stream flows*: USGS guage at Molena, *waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis/uv?site_no=02344872*.

**Appropriate gear:** 4- to 8-wt. rods, floating lines, intermediate lines for winter and high water, 0X–3X tippets.

**Useful fly patterns:** Stealth Bomber, Rubber Legged Dragon, Woolly Bugger, Double Barrel Popper, Boogle Bug, Dahlberg Diver, Whitlock's Diving Frog, Chocklett's Game Changer, Clouser Minnow, Lefty's Deceiver.

**Necessary accessories:** Polarized sunglasses, hat, drinking water, wading staff, shallow-draft boats (canoes, kayaks, or small rafts).

**Nonresident license:** $10/1 day plus $3.50 each additional day, $50/annual.

**Guides:** Fly Fish GA (Kent Edmonds), (706) 881-3249, *www.flyfishga.com*; Ocmulgee Outfitters (Quint Rogers), (478) 259-6594, *www.ocmulgeeoutfitters.com. Shuttles/canoe rentals*: Flint River Outdoor Center, (706) 647-2633, *https://flintriveroutdoor.center*.

**Maps/information:** *Georgia Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme; *Flint River User's Guide* by Joe Cook. Flint Riverkeeper, *www.flintriverkeeper.org*.