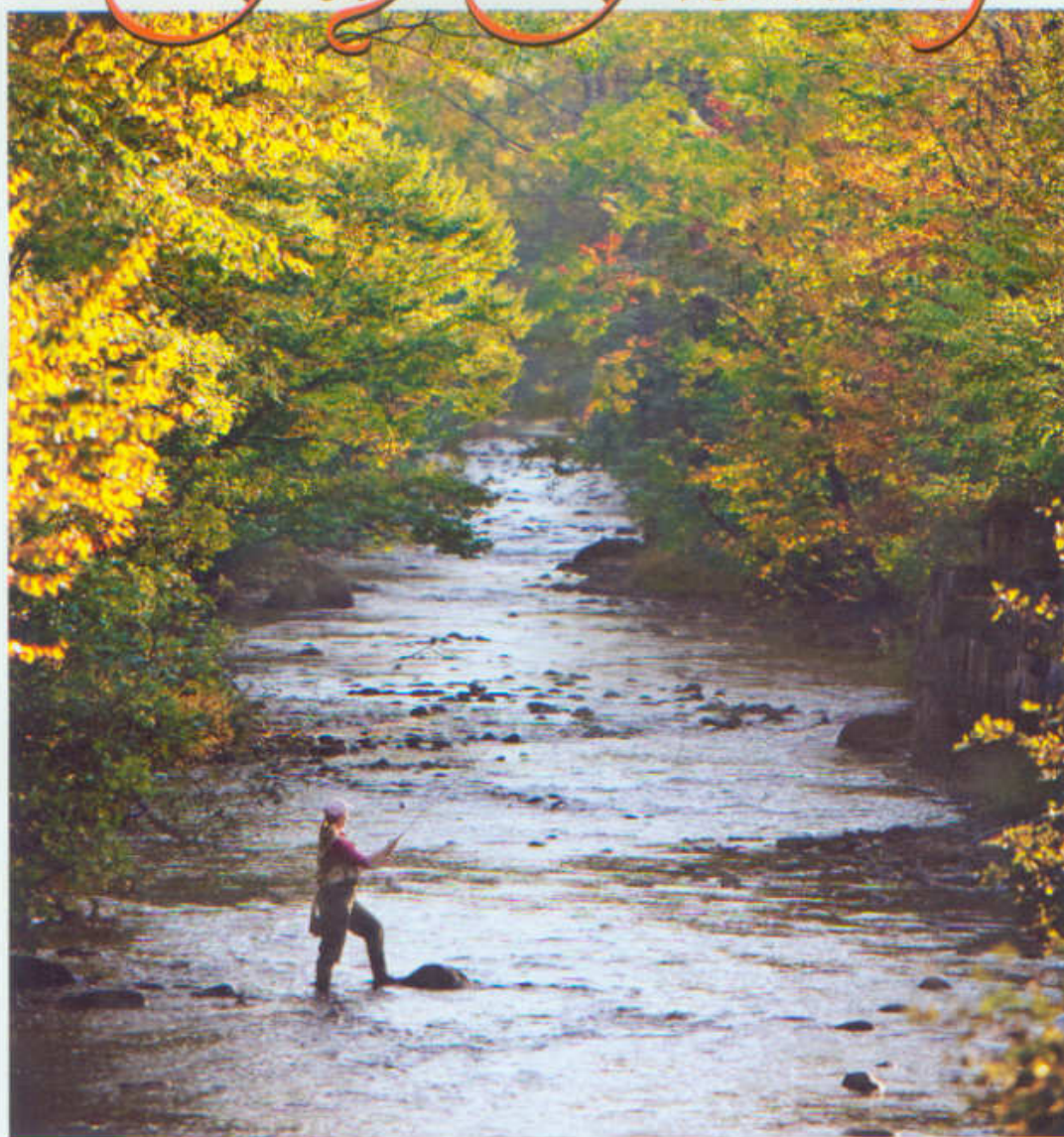


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ALL PHOTOS BY BILL R. CHILES

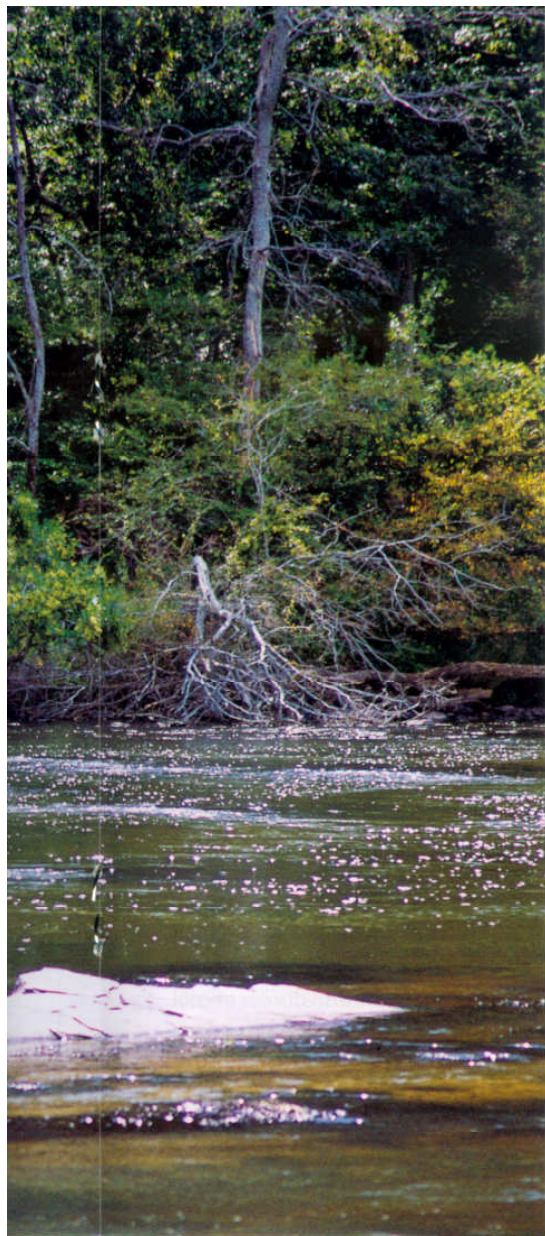
## Flint River, GA

### Searching for the Rare Shoal Bass

*By Bill R. Chiles*

**F**ish stories often begin with a description of a fly landing precisely where the storyteller intended, that tiny seam where the fish just rose, a millimeter to either side an exercise in futility as the fly is haplessly swept downstream by the complicated currents. The fly of this, my story, missed its mark by a good 4 feet. And rather than raise my rod tip to set the hook at just the right moment, I hooked the fish quite by accident, as I attempted to pull my fly off the water to recast it to the “right” spot. So much for precision.





*Kent Edmonds hooks a nice bass at Sprewell Bluff State Park (above). The unique shoal bass occurs in only a handful of drainages. Under prime conditions, a competent fly fisher can expect 40 or more specimens a day (left).*



The ensuing fight, however, would have more than compensated for the casting buffoonery had I not slipped on a wet rock and put a big bruise on my butt. I would love to say that, despite the aforementioned adversity, I managed to at least maintain my grip on my rod, but, in truth, the rod and reel bounced a good 15 feet down the big limestone boulder on which I once stood. Fortunately, the fat bass managed to hang on to the hook long enough for me to admire it for a second or so.

As it came unglamorously to hand I was stunned by its beauty. I have caught tens of thousands of lovely bass, caught them on farm ponds and oceanlike impoundments, on big rivers and tiny creeks. But when this specimen came to hand, it looked nothing like those others. This bass was different. For that matter, this fishery was different. I was looking at a gorgeous shoal bass from Georgia's Flint River.

Fly water is supposed to be born in wilderness, from rivulets of melting snow marrying into ever-widening shoulders, from rain running off mossy rock or water welling up from some deep, cold aquifer. Not the Flint. The Flint has less ostentatious beginnings. Its waters arise from the rain that drains south suburban Atlanta—from driveways, highways, office buildings, and subdivision lawns. Indeed, should one decide to plan a trip to fish the Flint, and if that trip requires a plane ticket, one will land at the country's busiest airport. And the rainwater from that very runway becomes a part of the Flint.

Such decidedly unpristine origins, however, do not make the Flint less special than fisheries that rise from more unsullied places. To the contrary, the Flint is even more special for its very existence. Soon after it escapes its city hell, the Flint transforms into a masterpiece of emerald green ribbon punctuated by broad rocky shoals of white water.

And roaming those shoals are a type of bass found nowhere else except here as well as the Chattahoochee, Apalachicola, and Chipola drainages: the shoal bass. So esoteric is the "shoalie" that it was, for decades, mistaken for its cousin the redeye, or Coosa, bass. But unlike the diminutive redeye, the shoal bass achieves significant proportions. Fish 5 pounds or larger are not uncommon. The world record is a breathtaking 8 pounds, 3 ounces. Best of all, they fight like a cross between a ticked-off, potbellied largemouth and a steroid-charged steelhead.



## The Fish and the Fishery

From its humble beginnings in Fulton County, Georgia, the Flint flows unimpeded for more than 200 river miles, one of only 40 rivers in the lower 48 to do so. This distinction was threatened not so long ago. In the early 1970s the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers researched a plan to impound the Flint near Thomaston. But in 1974 President Jimmy Carter vetoed a proposed law that would have forever destroyed the Flint as many now know and love it.

The upper Flint flows through the rolling hill country of west-central Georgia. Here, the plunge pools and runs are reminiscent of trout water, or at least smallmouth water. Near Culloden, the Flint drops over a fall line on its way to the coastal plain. The Flint of the Georgia low country becomes broad and swampy, flanked by thick forest. The Flint is impounded to form Lake Blackshear near Cordele and Lake Chehaw near Albany. Finally, the Flint joins the Chattahoochee and ends in Florida's Lake Seminole.

A variety of legitimate game fish inhabit the Flint, including largemouth bass, redbreast, bluegill, a variety of catfish, and, of course, the shoal bass, the star of this story. Shoalies are found throughout the drainage, though the farther south one goes the more largemouth one will encounter as well. Not that largemouth are bad, but they can be taken from virtually any puddle south of the Mason-Dixon. Shoal bass, however, are confined to the aforementioned drainages of Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. Such a limited range makes the shoal bass a very special quarry.

The shoal bass (*Micropterus cataractae*) was first described in 1999 when James Williams and George Burgess published their description of this "new" species in *Bulletin of the Florida Museum of Natural History*. The handsome shoal bass varies from olive to black in basic coloration. Its

eyes often have a red tint, a fact that for years led many to believe the shoal bass to be a subspecies of the redeye bass. Its heavily barred flanks, however, are more reminiscent of the spotted bass.

Not that locals needed to be told that their beloved shoal bass was special. For decades anglers from Georgia, Alabama, and Florida have plied their home waters for this magnificent fish, loving it for its aggressive takes and hard fights. Indeed, a big shoal bass that turns its broad side into flowing water is a challenge to bring to hand.

## When, Where, and How

"You can't write about this spot," Kent Edmonds said with a strange mix of the humility that is so common among Southern gentlemen and the earnestness of a father protecting a young child. Sprawling before us was a fly fisher's paradise: easy-to-wade rocky shoals stretching out to a distant bank, with dozens of cool plunges feeding pools loaded with gorgeous bass.

Though he has fished the lakes and streams of Georgia for more than three decades, Edmonds's passion for the Flint runs particularly deep. Sensing the magnitude of that passion, I respected his need to

guard this treasure. And after he treated me to a day of some of the finest river fishing one might ever imagine, I began to understand.

We caught bass after bass that bent our 5-weights to the cork. And so abundant were scrappy redbreasts that I considered running back to my Toyota for a 2-weight. Then again, I knew I could catch pretty redbreasts in just about any Georgia trickle. These bass, I knew, were special.





After a long day, a sore arm, a satisfying lunch, and a cool dip, I blurted out, "I could stay here forever."

"I did," replied Edmonds, a sheepish grin forming on his face.

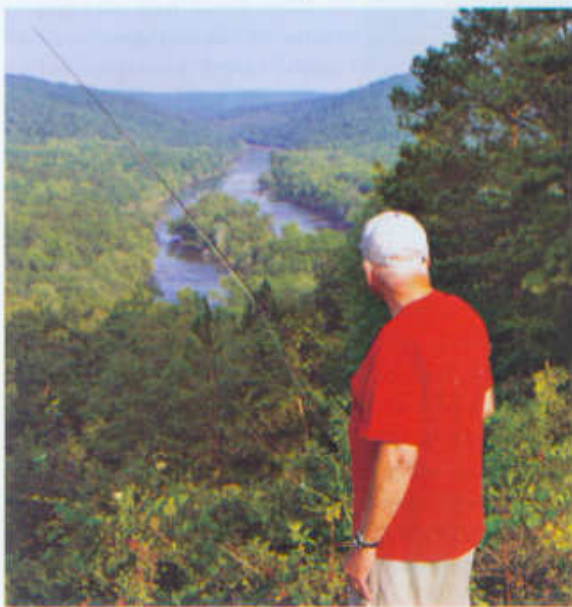
In this part of the world, fly fishing remains a little, well, odd, especially when bass are the target. If you can find a guide, chances are pretty high that said guide will be a spin fisher. And if you are lucky, the guide might at least know what a fly rod looks like. If your luck truly holds, the potential guide might even refrain from criticizing you too much for "sissy fishing." Edmonds is even better. He is a Federation of Fly Fishers-certified instructor. His fly-fishing expertise is impeccable.

Indeed, Edmonds is the Flint's premier fly-fishing guide. His knowledge can be invaluable when decoding the Flint River shoal bass. In addition to his vast knowledge, he has access to some sweet private water. And when it comes to a quality fishery, access, or lack thereof, can be everything. Which is a very significant issue on the Flint. Much of the Flint flows across private lands, with only a smattering of public water.

Numerous bridges offer tempting views of the Flint. Parking near the bridges and walking down to the river has been a long-standing tradition among locals. While it tends to be well tolerated, technically it is trespassing and not to be con-



*Rocky shoals like this shelf being probed by Kent Edmonds define the preferred habitat of the shoal bass (above). From a pullout, William Chiles, Sr., checks out the gorgeous Flint at Sprewell Bluff State Park (below).*

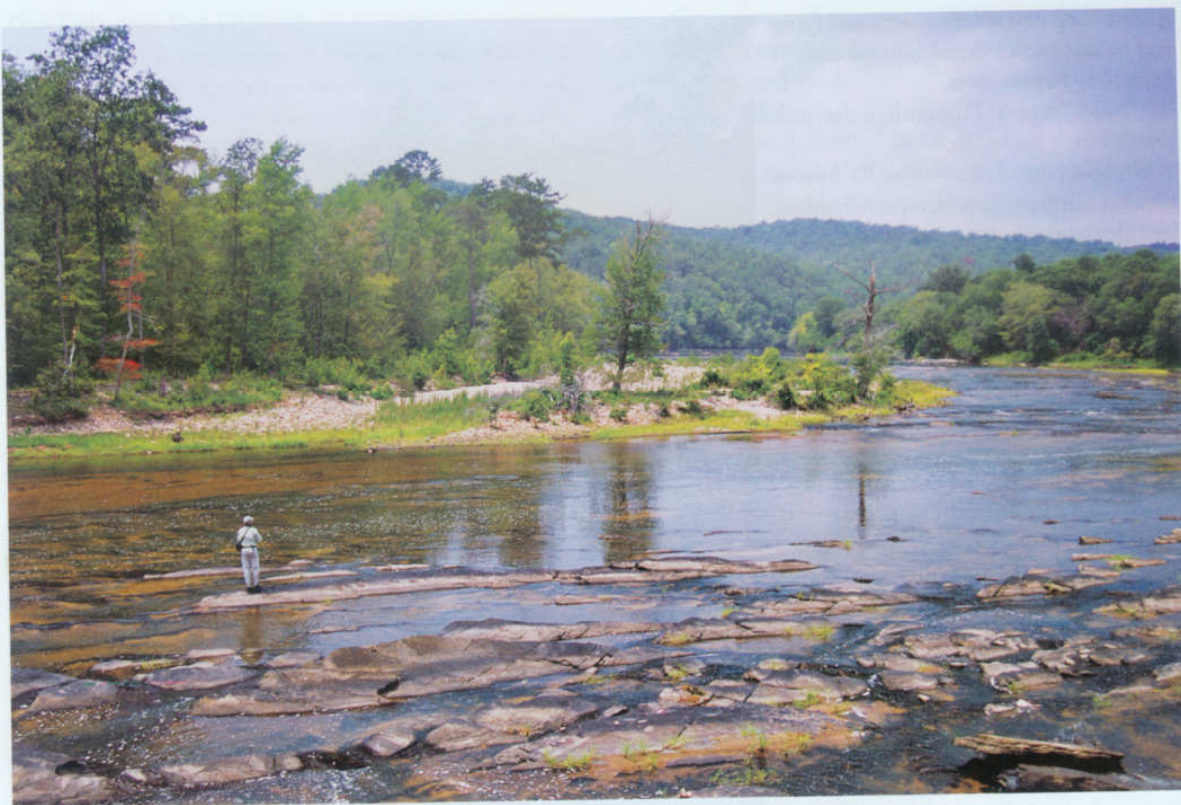


doned. Also, while private landowners have traditionally turned their heads, increased traffic across their land—not to mention the prerequisite trash associated with at least some humans—could spark action.

Notable publicly owned sections of the Flint include the Joe Kurz Wildlife Management Area, the Big Lazer Creek Wildlife Management Area, and Sprewell Bluff State Park. Combined, these three public tracts offer about 10 miles of prime shoalie water. So broad are the shoals that Sprewell Bluff alone could take days to fully explore with a fly.

Another option is a float trip. The Flint is navigable throughout most of its length and is perfect for a canoe, kayak, or pontoon craft. Georgia Highway 18 spans the Flint near the town of Woodbury. Though it makes for a very long day, Highway 18 to Sprewell Bluff is a float segment suitable for beginning paddlers and takes anglers through some awesome bass water. Sprewell Bluff to Georgia Highway 36 is a shorter trip that is also suitable for beginners and allows more time for probing all those gorgeous-looking shoals. Downstream from Highway 36, one can float to Po Bidy Road. The fishing is great, but the float is a bit more treacherous, with the Flint dropping about 70 feet in 2.5 miles.





*Kent Edmonds works the shoals at Sprewell Bluff State Park, which offers enough good water to occupy an angler for days.*

When shoal bass begin to wake from their winter slumber, just about any favored technique will catch them, though perhaps none is more popular than surface fishing. Take plenty of poppers in white, black, yellow, brown, orange, and chartreuse. Size-8 hooks will catch plenty of bass as well as more redbreasts than you can count. If you want to focus more on bass, especially the larger ones, move up to a size-4 or -6 popper. I now prefer foam over balsa or deer hair. Poppers of all materials work equally well, but the durability and buoyancy of foam is tough to beat.

Edmonds is partial to sliders and divers. He takes some of his biggest shoal bass on gaudy foam divers, abounding in rubber legs, that leave a long bubble trail. Great diving patterns include Rainy's Tsunami, Dahlberg Divers, and gurglers.

The river is rich in aquatic insects such as caddisflies and stoneflies, so be sure to carry trout dry flies. Shoal bass will devour a big, bushy Elk Hair Caddis or Stimulator.

Wulff-style dries and Humpies are also good patterns. Fly fishing is still a rather rare endeavor on the Flint, so there is no need to stress out too much about hatch matching. Besides, these are bass, not spring creek browns.

With shoal bass so eager to come to the surface, you can easily forget how productive nymphing can be on this water. Abundant free-living caddisfly pupae such as Green Rock Worms make pupa imitations very effective. Fishing a nymph dropper 18 to 24 inches behind a popper or dry fly offers the best of both worlds, not to mention plenty of double hookups.

The granddaddy of Flint River subsurface patterns is anything that resembles a Hellgrammite.

For decades, locals have taken some of the river's largest bass on live Hellgrammites fished under deep rock undercuts. Acceptable patterns include Mercer's Tungsten Rag Hellgrammite, Black Rubberlegs, and Murray's Hellgrammite. Less imitative patterns might also prove

### Rocky River Leech



PHOTO BY EASTERN FLY FISHING

**Hook:** Jig hook, size 6  
**Thread:** Black 3/0 UNI-Thread  
**Eyes:** Large bead chain  
**Tail:** Black marabou  
**Body:** Black Estaz



productive. These include Murray's Strymph and the Bitch Creek Nymph. Even stonefly patterns such as the Kaufmann Stone can make a suitable substitute.

Streamers are also very effective on shoal bass. Standard patterns such as Woolly Buggers, Zonkers, Clouser Minnows, and bunny streamers work like a charm. I like streamers that tap the rocky river bottom. My Rocky River Leech is tied on a jig hook so that it swims hook up. It's also simple to tie for those times when you have to sacrifice one to the river gods. Best of all, shoal bass gobble them like candy.

Though the Flint is open year-round, winter is pretty dead. Fortunately, spring starts early in west-central Georgia. The water often warms enough by mid-March to rouse shoal bass from their winter lethargy. April and May are the prime months on the Flint. Big bass move into shoal areas in great concentration to spawn. The major risk for failure at this time of year is a heavy spring rain. The Flint is sensitive to rainfall, and a good April shower can turn the river into a muddy torrent.

Summer is also a great time to fish the Flint, though big fish can be tougher to find. Summer water levels are generally ideal for wading. Also, the heat of a Southern summer makes wet wading—not to mention a swim—worth a day on the water even in the absence of good fishing. Fortunately, fishing on the Flint often remains favorable right through the hottest months.

As the summer heat begins to give way to the cool days of autumn, expect low water, beautiful foliage, and bass feeding aggressively for the coming winter. Fishing can be phenomenal in October. Good fishing often continues well into November.

### A Last Word

On the last day of my first trip for shoal bass, I reflected on my week with Edmonds and my amazing experience on the Flint. I had been to more exotic locations in my 40 years of fly fishing, yet I could not recall feeling more thrilled by a week on the water. Perhaps it was the realization that such an incredible resource was in my own backyard, though I knew that this was a place I would revisit even if plane tickets were required.

I could tell you of subsequent fish that I caught, of casts more becoming to one who writes of fly fishing, of perfect hook sets and masterful battles with worthy opponents, of maintaining an upright posture most of the time. But what fun is that? Suffice to say that I did manage to survive the week with only scrapes and bruises rather than broken bones—minor inconveniences for a shot at the most alluring of Southern basses. ➤

*Bill R. Chiles is the Southeast field editor for Eastern Fly Fishing.*

## FLINT RIVER NOTEBOOK



**When:** Open year-round; best late March–early November.

**Where:** From west-central GA to the FL panhandle.

**Headquarters:** Warm Springs and Pine Mountain, GA. **Information:** Warm Springs, [www.warmspringsga.com](http://www.warmspringsga.com); Pine Mountain Tourism Association, (800) 441-3502, [www.pinemountain.org](http://www.pinemountain.org); Franklin D. Roosevelt and Spewell Bluff state parks, [www.gastateparks.org](http://www.gastateparks.org).

**Appropriate gear:** 4- to 6-wt. rods, floating lines; 2- or 3-wt. rod for redbreasts.

**Useful fly patterns:** Poppers in various colors, gurglers, Dahlberg Diver, Elk Hair Caddis, Stimulator, Humpy, Royal Wulff, Woolly Bugger, Zonker, Clouser Minnow, Bunny Fly, bead-head Hare's Ear Nymph, bead-head Pheasant Tail Nymph, Kaufmann Stone, Rocky River Leech, Rainy's Tsunami, Green Rock Worm, Mercer's Tungsten Rag Hellgrammite, Black Rubberlegs, Murray's Hellgrammite, Murray's Strymph, Bitch Creek Nymph.

**Necessary accessories:** Wet-wading sandals, polarized sunglasses, sunscreen.

**Nonresident license:** \$7/7 days, \$24/1 year.

**Fly shops/guides:** Atlanta: The Fish Hawk, (404) 237-3473, [www.thefishhawk.com](http://www.thefishhawk.com). Lawrenceville: Bass Pro Shops, (678) 847-5500, [www.basspro.com](http://www.basspro.com). Fly Fishing West Georgia & Beyond (Kent Edmonds), (706) 883-7700, [www.flyfishga.com](http://www.flyfishga.com).

**Maps:** Georgia Atlas & Gazetteer by DeLorme Mapping.

