



South Carolina Natural Resources

A Blog of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources

Apr 8

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You know you're fishing Winyah Bay when the lights of International Paper's Georgetown Mill cast a glow over the water at the pre-dawn takeoff .

Greenwood's Brandon Cobb captured in-state bragging rights by winning the just-finished Bassmaster Elite Series tournament on Lake Hartwell. But this coming week brings a whole new set of variables and what promises to be a hard-fought contest, as the Series travels down to Georgetown for a second round of Palmetto State pro bass fishing action.

Text and photos by David Lucas

Ask anyone involved in the world of professional bass fishing and they will tell you that South Carolina is a major player in terms of attracting tournament trail of dollars of economic activity. They have both played host to the delight of economic development and tourism officials in the Upstate and Midlands regions.



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On the coast of South Carolina, Georgetown has also gotten involved in the tournament fishing game, and with its position at the confluence of several major river systems (the Black, Waccamaw, Pee Dee and Sampit rivers all converge in Winyah Bay) this laid-back coastal town has had tremendous success in attracting both freshwater and saltwater tournaments. The town has a longstanding relationship with the Bassmaster/B.A.S.S. organization and has hosted Bassmaster tournaments each year since 2015, including BASS Nation amateur regionals, College Series events and the fan-favorite “Elite” professional tour. Investing in facilities with enough boat ramps, parking and other infrastructure necessary to host large tournaments is a move that has paid handsome dividends for places like Georgetown and Anderson, as the popularity of professional tournament bass fishing has skyrocketed over the past decade.



Excited fans crowd the shoreline for the first day of fishing at the 2018 Bassmaster Classic at Lake Hartwell's Green Pond Landing.

As the technology that enables live video coverage of these events from first cast to last weigh-in has grown, so has interest among fans. If past years are any indication, tens-of-thousands of the faithful will flock to Georgetown for the

early-morning “take-offs” and evening weigh-ins, culminating with the final weigh-in Sunday night (April 14th). County tourism officials estimate that the



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be able to enjoy the Elite

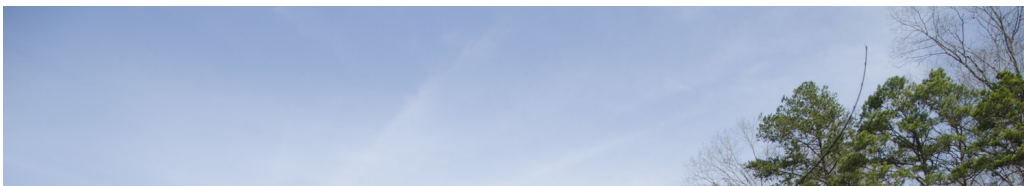
Expo and the Winyah Bay Heritage Festival, both of which will be taking place during the tournament on Saturday and Sunday.



Brandon Cobb shows off his winning form on Lake Murray in 2017.

Bassmaster anglers, including Cobb and fellow South Carolinians Jason Williamson of Augusta and Summerville native Patrick Walters will begin arriving in the area for three days of pre-tournament practice on Monday, April 8, and all will have a big decision to make. Because of the way the tournament rules are structured, any water that is accessible by boat can be legally fished, including the Santee and Cooper Rivers. The perception among many of the pro anglers is that those waters hold larger bass than the Black or Waccamaw. Britt Myers won the 2016 event in Georgetown by heading up the Cooper. The catch? Fishing the Cooper entails a long – nearly two hours each way – trip down the Intercoastal Waterway to Charleston Harbor and much less time to actually fish.

It's a dilemma, one that Jason Williams, who'll be fishing in Georgetown this week for only the second time in his career, sums up pretty well.





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“You know this time around, we might have a couple of guys who have some past knowledge, like Patrick Walters and a couple of others, but for me, it’s only the second time I’ll be going to Winyah,” said Williamson. “Anytime you have as many options, you have to look at so many variables and facts as you prepare. What I mean by that – Water levels – there’s obviously been a lot of flooding here over the past several months, you’ve got to look at tides, you’ve got to look at – you know – a big factor is the Cooper. “It’s no secret, that’s where the bigger ones live, that’s where it was won before, everybody kind of knows that going in.” But it’s 105 miles one-way.”

Like most of the anglers, Williamson said he’ll make his final decision about where to spend his time fishing during practice this week, depending on those variables and conditions



A Bassmaster Elite Series angler fishes a bucolic stretch of the Waccamaw River during the 2016 Winyah Bay tournament. Anglers this year will again have to decide if fishing "close to home" in the waters around Georgetown will be a better strategy than making a long and difficult trek down to Charleston or McClellanville to try their luck in the Cooper or Santee rivers.

“It’s one of those things where, a day or two before you go, you need to look at it at that point. That way you can get the most accurate read on where the river’s at, at that point.”



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But, he added, he's definitely leaning towards making the Cooper run to try for the brass ring. It's not that the other rivers within closer striking distance of some good fish – just the of the anglers who choose to I finish in the tournament money, but Williamson thinks that, all things being equal, just like in 016, the largest bags will probably be pulled from the Cooper.

“It’s difficult to prepare for, just because of the vast water, the vast options, there’s so many different playing fields that we can go play on, and if you choose the wrong one, it can be a death wish as far as your tournament finish, but if you pick the right one, you can be a hero,” said Williamson. “It’s a beautiful place, I’m super-excited that we have a couple of tournaments in my home state of South Carolina. I’d love to see more as the years roll by, but Winyah Bay is different, it’s definitely more difficult. Like I said, for us as anglers, the more variables, the more question marks, the more X-factors, you know, the harder it is.”

Contrast that with Lake Hartwell, which is, to some extent, a more “angler-friendly” spot, with different types of water and conditions to suit most fishing styles, all within easy reach of the landing. “It’s a lot easier to prepare for a lake tournament like Lake Hartwell,” said Williamson. “Whether you are familiar with it or not [beforehand] it’s still easier because you’ve just got one body of water, you’re looking at one map, you know, it’s only so big, and you can break it down a lot quicker.”

Winyah Bay, by comparison, is going to require some tough choices and A LOT of preparation, and maybe some luck, but two things are for certain. First, come Sunday afternoon, someone among the 75-angler field will be holding up that Elite Series trophy and the winner’s check for \$100,000 while thousands of delirious fans crowd the stage at the Carroll A. Campbell Marine complex, much to the delight of local merchants, restaurant owners and hoteliers.

Second, South Carolina is incredibly lucky to have such a wide diversity of fishing habitats and fantastic access – whether for watching our favorite pros for heading out for a leisurely day of fishing with family and friends. Either way, our unmatched natural resources and world-class facilities add up to a win-win-win for our communities, our local businesses and our outdoors enthusiasts.

“I’m just super-happy that BASS is coming back to my home state of South Carolina,” said Williamson. “There’s definitely a bunch of great anglers that have come from this state, and I’m pretty dang proud to be able to spend two

weeks fishing here.”



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Location:

Carroll Campbell Marine Complex
101 Riverwalk Drive
Georgetown

Date/Time:

Thursday April 11 - Sunday April 14

Admission is free for concerts, festival and viewing of daily boat launch and weigh-in.

More information at: <http://www.fishgeorgetown.com/>



A crowd gathers for the final weigh-in at the 2016 Bassmaster Elite Series tournament held in Georgetown.

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