



Bow fisherman D.J. Langdon, right, takes a shot while Tyler Schultze looks on as the sun sets at Lake Gaston. Bow fishermen target fish like gar, bowfin, carp and catfish.

# PUTTING A BOW ON A FISHING ALTERNATIVE

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY MELISSA MCGAW

I can still remember the sun setting on a warm evening in August, with Shearon Harris Lake smoothing over like glass, and the skeeters swarming my head as we launched the boat. I was as excited as a kid on Christmas, with a smirk on my face as we made our way into the first cove. This was the start of my first bowfishing trip.

I picked up my recurve bow and was given brief instructions from a wise friend, who told me to remember the refraction of the water and to aim low. “And then when you think you’re aiming low enough, aim a little lower.”

My good friend beside me fired up the handheld spotlight and started shining the shallow waters as I anxiously stood awaiting my first shot. The first fish to come into sight was about a fillet-size catfish. I drew back and fired . . . and missed. I reeled in the arrow, still grinning and thinking that there was no way the next one was getting away. I was right. The next 10 got away.

But then, a 2-foot catfish quickly came swimming by the boat and into the light. I aimed and BAM! Got him! I couldn’t wait to reel him in, since that brought as much excitement as shooting. It was a proud moment for me and one that quickly had me hooked on bowfishing.

Although bowfishing has been around since ancient times, it is a sport growing in popularity across the country. When talking with other wildlife enforcement officers in North Carolina, they all speak of the activity found on lakes and rivers in their county. It is a sport that requires resourcefulness in a variety of areas.

Bowfishing helps keep archers’ shooting skills sharp during the deer hunting off-season. And although both pursuits require a

bow and arrow, bowfishing can greatly differ from deer hunting. Unless you’re using a longbow or recurve, hunters commonly use sights for game hunting. Bowfishing requires more of an instinctive aiming method simply because fish won’t stay still long enough for you to “aim” at them.

Another factor that makes this sport challenging is how the shooter must adjust for the refraction caused by the water. Refraction is how the light bends when it travels from air to water, creating an optical illusion in the water in which the fish appears to be swimming higher than it actually is. The first few times you go bowfishing, adjusting to or grasping the concept of the impact that refraction has on your shot is . . . interesting. After my first few shots, I quickly realized the significance of those words of wisdom: “aim low, and then a little lower.” Refraction adds to the great challenge of bowfishing and makes that successful shot more gratifying.

## HOOKED ON BOWFISHING

I’m hardly alone in my passion for bowfishing. Andy Thomas has seen bowfishing’s popularity steadily rise ever since he first tried it out nearly 30 years. His love of the sport led him to start Polebuster Guide Service for bowfishing, primarily on Lake Norman and Lake Wylie, and launch a statewide bowfishing association called the Tar Heel Fish Stickers. Now, he helps organize and run bowfishing tournaments that typically include 60 to 70 participants.

Thomas grew up in Avery County in western North Carolina along the Toe River. As a kid, he and his friends would do a little makeshift bowfishing with aluminum arrows. “Most of the time, the arrows would just float to the surface.” Introduced to actual bowfishing when he was 19, he has been in love with it ever since.

“If you like to hunt and like to fish, it’s non-stop action,” he said. “You’re out there

BOWFISHING CAN HELP  
SHARPEN SHOOTING SKILLS  
AND OFFERS ANOTHER WAY TO  
ENJOY TIME ON THE WATER



Hannah Shively targets catfish at Harris Lake. Stalking fish at night with the aid of lights is a popular way to bowfish.



looking for fish instead of sitting there pole fishing waiting for fish. My motto is that once you go bow, you'll never go pole fishing again."

Getting started in this sport with just the basics can be fairly inexpensive; you can always invest as much as you desire to suit your fancy. This sport can be done from land or from boat, during daylight or by spotlight. You can quickly convert your longbow, recurve or compound bow into a bowfishing bow. The different style of bows will have their pros and cons, and your choice comes down to personal preference. Personally, I'm a simple gal, so I like to be able to slip a reel onto my recurve and be ready to go bowfishing in a matter of minutes.

A reel that quickly attaches and converts your bow into bowfishing gear can range in cost from an average of \$20 to hundreds of dollars. There are several varieties of reels on the market. Reels come with line that is usually loosely confined in the reel in order to maximize the quick release when shot. The minimum poundage you'd like to have on your line will ultimately depend on the area you are fishing and the species you are targeting.

A good rule of thumb for bowfishing typical North Carolina lakes or rivers would be to use a 100- to 150-pound line, just in case you were to find the "catch of the day" in your spotlight. You have to buy arrows, usually two will get you by for a while, simply because they differ slightly from an average arrow used for hunting game animals. Bowfishing arrows are typically made of a fiberglass or carbon, which weighs a little more due to the nature of the environment and target species, and are without the fletchings found on hunting arrows. The arrowheads are barbed so that the arrow cannot come back through the fish when reeled in.

#### IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET

In North Carolina, only nongame fish can be shot while bowfishing. This means that being able to identify fish is a key skill, one that must be mastered before letting an arrow fly. Any size and creel limits that apply to nongame fish for a traditional rod-and-reel angler apply to bowfishers. For example, in Lake Norman, you can only take one blue catfish greater than 32 inches. That regulation applies to bowfishers as well.

"The thing about bowfishing, it kind of crosses that line, if you will, between hunting and fishing," Commission Inland Fisheries Division Chief Christian Waters said. "Just like with hunting, you wouldn't pull the trigger unless you are 100 percent sure of what you are shooting at. I certainly would strongly encourage bowfishers to know what they are shooting at before they shoot. And

if there is any question, they should hold the shot for sure."

Catfish, carp, bowfin and gar are the main species targeted by bowfishers. Additional harvest of these fish can help fisheries managers collect data and manage these species where needed. Commission Fisheries Biologist Kirk Rundle stated that "anecdotal evidence suggest that gar, bowfin, common carp and catfish are most often targeted. Grass carp are considered a highly prized species due to their large size, however, where grass carp are stocked for vegetation control purposes, harvest is generally not allowed or limited without special authorization."

In fact, bowfishers have worked with the Commission on projects studying the population of grass carp that had been stocked in Lake Gaston and Lake Norman. Since



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Top: Tyler Schultze, left, and D.J. Langdon draw on fish at Lake Gaston. Left: Langdon lands a small catfish. Right: Langford holds a nice blue catfish while Schultze displays a longnose gar he arrowed.



grass carp are generally hard to collect because they mainly live in the shallows where they feed on vegetation, bowfishers can be of help catching them. At Gaston, bowfishers with a special authorization can shoot one grass carp per day and then deposit the fish in specific coolers around the lake. N.C. State researchers then collect the fish to get a general understanding of how that population is doing.

“We know how many were stocked in Gaston,” Waters said. “So, if we can calculate how many have died, we can get an idea of how many are still in the lake.”

Removing non-native common carp can benefit habitats due to the fish’s feeding habits that can stir up bottom sediments and increase turbidity. “When you have large numbers of common carp, something like bowfishing has the potential to reduce their numbers which allows the system to recover from an excessive sediment scenario,” Waters said.

#### DON'T WASTE YOUR FISH

Catfish, gar and carp can all provide good vittles for the table. It’s all in the cooking. There are tons of good recipes available at your fingertips to try out at your next shindig. Whatever your flavor, it is important to make sure you are being an ethical and

moral sportsman/woman when disposing of your catch.

Some folks will use carp for bait when trapping, or use it as fertilizer. Other fish, like bowfin, gar and suckers, were once considered rough fish but they do play a role in the ecosystem, so the Commission discourages bowfishers from taking them in mass numbers. So, whether it be on your plate, in your garden, or used to entice critters into your traps, make sure you are disposing of the resource properly.

“We encourage people to be very responsible in what they shoot and harvest,” Waters said. “With bowfishing, it is a new level because the take of a fish will result in mortality, unlike with a hook and line. So that has to be kept in mind.

“We have considered and continue to consider a way to maintain fish like bowfin and gar and suckers, where we can allow harvest but maybe put a cap on total harvest to protect those species. The idea of removing large numbers of those is a concern, so we ask folks to exercise restraint because those animals do have a purpose in the environment and are needed.”

As part of his preparation for hosting a tournament, Thomas posts an ad on Craigslist inviting people to come out and take the fish the participants shoot. He said he

normally has plenty of takers who like to cook and eat the fish. Thomas said that he’ll also often bring any leftover gar from his outings to hog farmers, who will use it as feed. In recent years, however, he has learned that these fish can be good eating as well—despite their reputation.

“People think [common] carp is a trash fish,” Thomas said. “But catfish and carp live in the same environment. I’ve tried carp. Would I go out just to fish for carp? No, but it’s not bad.

“For years, I took gar to the hogs. A guide showed how to skin out gar. It is the poor man’s lobster. It’s one of my go-to fish. I have it in my freezer now.”

Bowfishing is another reason to get outdoors and enjoy the resources we’ve been blessed with. It is fairly inexpensive to get started, a great way to keep your bow skills sharp during offseason, another excuse to gather with good people and another way to put some good eatings on the table. I encourage you to give it a try. You will enjoy every shot. ♦

*Hannah Shively is a law enforcement officer in Wake County with the Wildlife Resources Commission. This is her first article. Wildlife in North Carolina Editor Josh Leventhal contributed to this article.*