Fowl Fury!

Sometimes, fishing is for the birds

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

Like a scene from a classic Alfred Hitchcock movie, swarming, squawking birds began their attack. The frantic fowl hovered low over the bay surface, periodically diving to make another kill.

"Watching birds is a good way to find speckled trout," advised Bobby Abruscato with A-Team Fishing Adventures (251-661-7696, www.ateam-fishing.com) in Mobile. "In the right spot, it gets insane. People can catch a speck limit quickly because the fish are in a feeding frenzy."

Speckled trout frequently gather in large schools to heard baitfish or shrimp to the surface. At the surface, frenzied fish churn the water. Sharp-eyed feathered terrors quickly spot the ruckus and pounce on panicked bait attempting to flee the vampire-like dental equipment slashing at them from below.

Anglers can frequently land quick limits under diving birds, but that doesn't mean they should chase after every feathered creature plunging into the water. A bird could dive on a single dead fish or a piece of floating bread. To confirm fishy activity, study the situation with binoculars. Look for corroborating signs such as bait jumping or fish striking.

"Seeing a bird diving doesn't necessarily mean anything," Abruscato explained. "Birds dive into the water all the time. Not every bird diving into the water means a trout school, but with the right birds in the right spot, fishing can be awesome!"

Some anglers call terns "liar birds" because they dive all the time. Much smaller than seagulls, terns typically go after smaller bait that might not interest trout attacking shrimp. Diving pelicans could indicate trout, but usually go after larger baitfish, although pelicans and gulls sometimes dive on the same prey.

"The key to fishing around birds is to look for the right birds," Abruscato said. "It's so easy to chase down terns and pelicans, but it's those laughing gulls that really give it away. The laughing gulls are easy to identify because people can see them and hear them from a long ways off. When they start that laughter, people need to pay attention because something is happening."

Besides identifying birds, anglers also need to "read" them. One or two diving gulls might not mean much, but several excited, noisy birds could indicate where a speck school recently appeared. Nothing gets "bird" anglers more excited than hovering gulls. When trout push bait to the surface, birds fly low over the water trying to grab any tidbits before another one gets it.

After spotting bird activity, resist the temptation to roar into the chaos at high speed and begin flailing the water. Nothing shuts down a feeding fish school like propellers driven by considerable horsepower. Instead, determine the direction the school is going and plan a drift based upon prevailing wind and currents. Stop the boat well away from the activity to let the winds or tides carry the boat toward the fish. Only use the trolling motor sparingly for directional control.

Flocks of seagulls attack baitfish in the Gulf of Mexico.

Photos by John N. Felsher

Bobby Abruscato of A-Team Fishing Adventures admires a speckled trout he caught while fishing in Mississippi Sound near Bayou La Batre, Ala.

When frenzied trout push bait to the surface, the voracious predators might smash anything that touches the water. For sheer excitement, nothing beats a hungry fish blasting a topwater bait. Heavy topwaters sail far, but usually come with multiple treble hooks. Anglers could spend more time unhooking fish than hooking them. Anglers can fling lipless crankbaits long distances, but these baits also carry treble hooks.

In Alabama waters, schooling fish typically key on shrimp, but when fishing live bait, pulling crustaceans from the baitwell and hooking them on the rig takes time better spent casting. Therefore, many anglers choose plastics. Anything that mimics a shrimp makes an excellent choice.

"When I'm fishing a school of trout under birds, I prefer to throw artificials because I don't want to spend too much time rebaiting or casting the bait off," Abruscato recommended. "Since the fish are high in the water column, I throw a popping cork rig with a Gulp! or Vudu Shrimp about two to three feet under the cork. If a fish misses or gets off, leave the bait in the water. Another one will probably hit it."