

## OUTDOORS

## Nasty winter didn't knock out ticks in Mid-South

Back during December and January when deer hunters were shivering through one of the coldest winters in recent memory, many were comforted slightly by the assumption that the harsh temperatures might mean fewer ticks come spring.

But any hunter who subscribed to that theory seriously enough to forgo using bug repellent for his first spring turkey hunt learned quickly how misguided it was.

Even after the nasty winter, the tick season in the Mid-South has been even nastier — and the summer isn't even half over.

"We received several reports of tick encounters in Tennessee during March and April," said Dr. Thomas N. Mather, director of the University of Rhode Island Center for Vector-Borne Disease. "Then from April to May, we saw a quantum surge in the number of reports. It was like an explosion."

That spring tick explo-



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sion in the Mid-South was dominated by the Lone Star tick — a species that is easily identifiable because the females have a distinct white spot on their brown backs. Mather believes the Lone Star tick is so prevalent here because we have so many whitetail deer, the tick's preferred host.

I had an amazing encounter with Lone Star ticks back in May, finding and removing 13 after one afternoon of barbecuing on my back patio in rural Hardeman County. I treated the area with granules to extinguish the ticks the next day, and I put away any belief that the cold winter might have made a dent in the tick population.

Experts like Mather never lived under that as-

## MORE INFO ON TICKS

If you're having a bad tick season like most people in the Mid-South, you should spend some time on the website tickcounter.org. The site, which is operated by the University of Rhode Island Center for Vector-Borne Disease, features helpful information on protecting yourself, your home and your pets against ticks. You can also get up-to-date reports on tick activity in this region and receive feedback on your own personal tick encounters.

sumption.

Earlier this year, Mather conducted an experiment by placing several ticks in a vial and burying it in the snow in what he termed "frigid Rhode Island." After 24 hours with nighttime temperatures reaching 3 degrees, he dug up the ticks and found they were just as lively as ever.

"That experiment suggests that anyone who believed the really cold winter would mean fewer ticks was mistaken," Mather said. "For anyone who assumed they didn't need to protect themselves against ticks when spring arrived, that was a lesson learned — and one that's

worth remembering for the future."

This year, for the first time, the URI Center for Vector-Borne Disease has been operating a nationwide "Tickspotters" program that allows people to report tick encounters from anywhere in the country. Through data collected from the program, the Center has created a point-and-click map that shows current tick activity for all regions.

The E/S Central Division, which includes Tennessee and Mississippi, currently registers high tick activity, just like W/S Central region that includes Arkansas. Lone

Star ticks, both males and females, are the most prevalent ticks in both regions.

Though Lone Stars aren't associated with the two most-feared tick-borne diseases — Rocky Mountain spotted fever and Lyme disease — they are the primary vector for Ehrlichiosis. Symptoms for the ailment, which usually occur within one to two weeks after a bite from an infected tick, include fever, headache, fatigue and muscle aches.

Mather said Lone Star ticks are some of the fastest crawlers and aggressive biters of the tick world. But fortunately, only 5-10 percent of them are capable of infecting humans with Ehrlichiosis.

Besides overconfident outdoorsmen, Mather said an active tick season like the one we're having now usually results in many people encountering ticks for the first time.

Since those folks tend to freak out — and who wouldn't the first time they find a bloodsucking insect

attached to their skin? — it'd be wise for them to visit Mather's organization's website at tickcounter.org.

Instead of a bunch of technical info about diseases and treatments, the site focuses mainly on how to protect yourself from ticks and how to identify the species of tick that's bitten you. You can even become a tickspotter and report your personal encounters — and if you include a photo of the tick, you're likely to get a personal response from one of the Center's experts.

"A lot of people, when they get bitten by a tick for the first time, they have no idea what they're dealing with," Mather said. "It makes them feel a little better to get some specific information about the situation — and this year, a lot of people are finding themselves in that situation."

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Catfish anglers David Shipman and Brooke Wilkins of Corinth, Mississippi, hold up part of their winning catch at Saturday's Bass Pro Shops Big Cat Quest on the Mississippi River in Robinsonville, Mississippi. The pair caught their fish in the river near Memphis.

## KING-SIZE CATS

## Surprise catch lands Shipman, Wilkins top prize at Big Cat Quest

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ROBINSONVILLE, Miss. — With the water rising at an ominous rate of about one foot per day on the Mississippi River, veteran catfish anglers David Shipman and Brooke Wilkins decided to run north to Memphis from Tunica Riverpark in search of slower current during Saturday's Bass Pro Shops Big Cat Quest tournament.

Shipman knew a spot in that area where he believed they could catch a few fish in the 10- to 11-pound range just to avoid getting skunked.

But the fish fooled him — and in a good way.

A spot that Shipman said had never produced big fish before was holding some monsters, and the team brought five catfish to the scales that weighed 128.70 pounds to claim the \$1,500 first-place prize. Their catch was anchored by a blue cat that weighed 41.45.

Jeff Dodd of Trenton, Tennessee, and Daryl Masingale of Paragould, Arkansas, took big-fish honors with a behemoth that weighed 80.55.

"We knew we weren't gonna win, but we got lucky," Shipman said. "We started catching 8- and 9-pounders, and all of a sudden some bigger fish bit. Never caught fish like that in that place before."

The pair caught their fish using a tactic known as "suspend drifting" — and like most of the field they were using skipjack for bait. They said they had two stretches of about 60-90 minutes when the fish bit well.

"I've had it work out this way before where you catch big fish from



Jeff Dodd of Trenton, Tennessee, removes an 80.55-pound catfish from the live well with help from his teammate, Daryl Masingale of Paragould, Arkansas. The catfish took big-fish honors during Saturday's Big Cat Quest.

a spot where you really weren't expecting to catch them," Shipman said. "Most of the time it doesn't work that way. But this was a good time for it to happen."

The fishing was better, in general, than many expected with the river rising so rapidly. The top five teams all had more than 100 pounds, including the Corinth team of Larry Muse,

Dino Meador and Frank Meador, who finished second with 112.20.

Rounding out the top five were Masingale and Dodd with 105.20, the three-man team of Brad Stout, Billy Littleton and Rick Cothren with 104.50, and Matt Bingham and Josh Doyle with 102.95.

Masingale and Dodd created perhaps the biggest stir at the weigh-in stand with their 80.55 whopper. Neither would admit which angler actually landed the fish.

"We didn't have a fish at 9 o'clock, and we already had one fish on when that big fish hit," Dodd said. "It just kind of ticked the bait — nothing out of the ordinary. But when we laid back on it, we knew it was out of the ordinary."

Dodd and Masingale, who were drifting with skipjack, might have swept first place and big fish if they had managed one more decent catfish. But they weren't in the mood to complain.

"That's the biggest fish either of us has ever weighed in for a tournament," Dodd said. "When you bring an 80-pounder to the scales, it's hard to be disappointed about anything."

Shipman and Wilkins both live in Corinth, Mississippi, a city that has become known for a growing list of accomplished catfish anglers. Shipman has been a patron of Wilkins' Corinth restaurant, "Martha's Menu," for years.

At 20, Wilkins was one of the youngest anglers in the event.

"I always enjoy fishing with David, and I love fishing on the Mississippi River," Wilkins said. "It's dangerous, but it's a great place to fish."

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