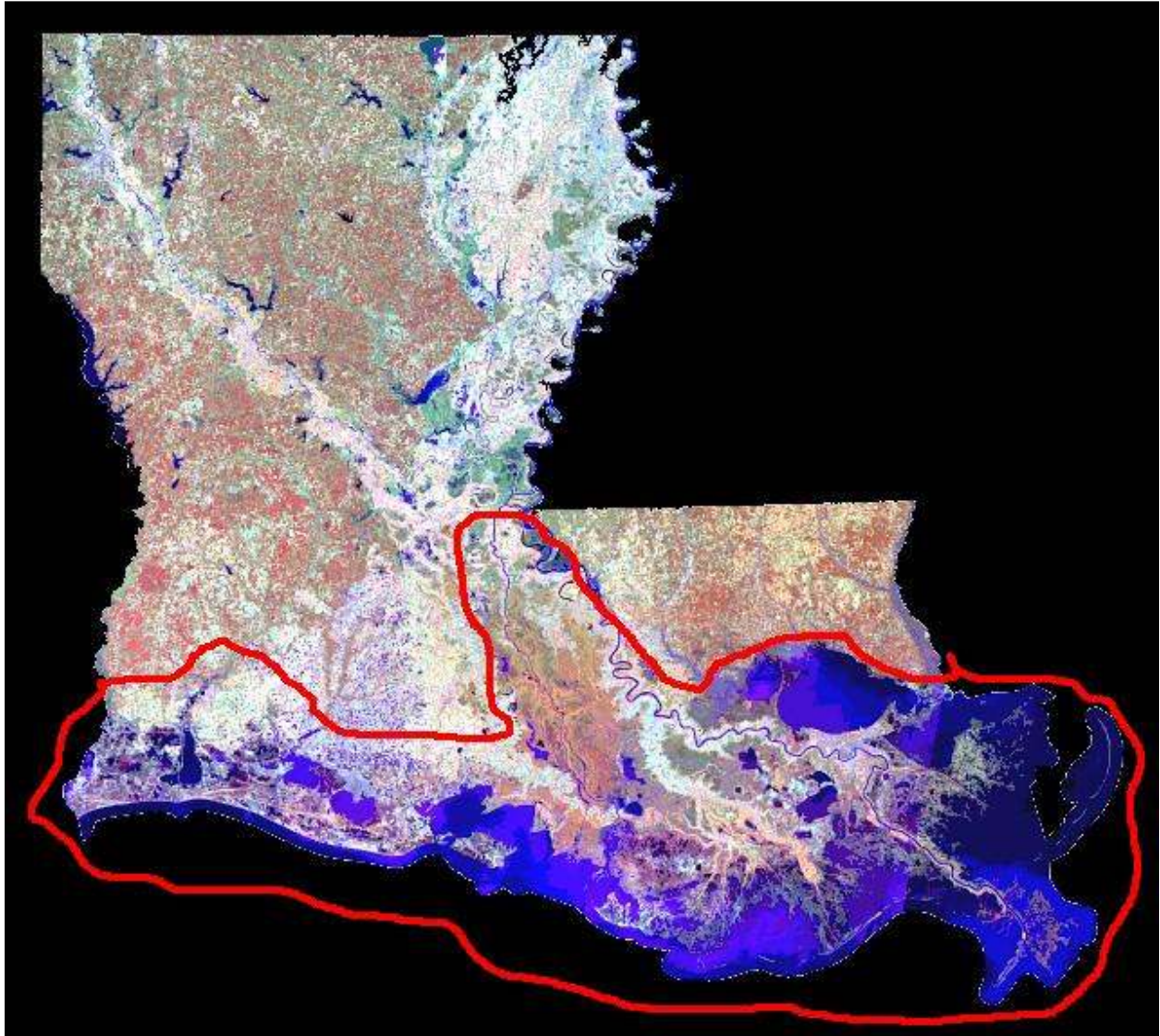


2009 BASSmasters Central Open
Atchafalya Basin – Morgan City, Louisiana



The Atchafalaya Basin is probably one of the one most unique fisheries I have ever been to. It is a maze of Natural Bayous, Pipelines, Canals and Natural Lakes all located in the southern swamps and coastal marsh area of south Louisiana. The Basin itself encompasses 595,000 Acres plus you can access a lot more area by exploring the areas east and west of the basin including the swamps and Mississippi River Delta. The fishery is virtually endless where you can fish. I have visited this fishery several times in my career and it always ceases to amaze me the endless areas to fish. This time we are thrown with some very uncertain circumstances before starting. Hurricane Gustav had dramatic effects on the fishery in 2008 causing a great amount of damage and large fish kills. But of even more

importance was the indulgence of water coming down the Atchafalaya River. The Atchafalaya River is a safety valve or spillway for the Red and Mississippi River. The Basin is normally at 2 Foot Elevation and it was 5.9 and rising as I prepared for this event. Using high water is a bonus but in a swamp it always the bass to escape into the vast woods and unreachable areas.

Practice Day One:



I was excited to get back to the Basin and especially back into competitive fishing. In August I had some emergency surgery to repair a nagging injury and this would be my first BASS event since the surgery and having to miss the last event. I headed back to a familiar area I knew from the last time BASS visited the basin that I had reaped rewards from. It didn't take long to produce again and it produced very quickly. I caught two nice Basin Bass on a Secret Lures Chubby Frog while throwing into a maze of duck seed and flooded vegetation. I quickly buried the hook to reduce the chances of hooking anything I might need at a later date and had 3 more blow-ups in a very short period. These fish were in the 2 to 3 pound range. (14" Length Limit on the Basin)



I kicked the trolling motor and quickly moved to another area of the large bayou/small natural lake in the north basin. The nice thing this water was near normal compared to the muddy water I encountered getting to it. In the back the water cleared even more. I picked up a LuckyCraft Redemption Series spinnerbait and started working the flooded vegetation and laydowns and again caught two more quality fish. I'd seen enough. I needed to find more so I kept hitting canals, bayous and anything else I could see in the woods of the northern basin. I covered a lot of miles today. Searching from I-10 south to Pigeon Area of the lake. I was pretty excited on my find today. It's nice when you start by catching a few. The big thing was the water was dirty and finding fishable water was hard to come by.



Practice Day Two:



Today I was going to explore the most stable water on the Basin. The Teche Bayou. This bayou has locks on both end and water is very stable. The locks should help maintain a fishable standard for the basin. It's a known community area and should see lots of boats if anglers are struggling. But you got to catch them first. I started the day fishing the many docks and Cypress trees and vegetation in the Teche. It was a rough start. Then I started noticing on my Humminbird Side Imaging all the balls of bait and fish suspended off a break. It was a nice little ledge. I decided to move off shore and start concentrating on fishing the ledge and where the fish where. Immediately I started catching fish. But they were small or just short of being keepers. As I moved down the ledge I noticed the bait balls starting to break up. This usually means something is feeding on them. I caught to quick keepers on back to back cast. Nothing big but keepers. Hey this might be a trick.



I moved further down in the river bend and found another sweet ledge. And it had all the right ingredients. Busted up bait balls and fish. I picked up the LuckyCraft SKT Mini DR and started fishing the drop and immediately caught another nice keeper then just a little further caught another one. I had figured out another area that could produce but I was going to have to weed through lots of little ones but I figured I could scrap out 5 if I worked all day at it. I fished both sides and spent several hours looking at all the ledges that were available to me . Some would drop from 2 to 8 foot some would drop for 6 to 18 foot. It didn't seem to matter as long as they dropped. The amazing thing was the anglers fishing on top the ledge all complained of no success.



Practice Day Three:

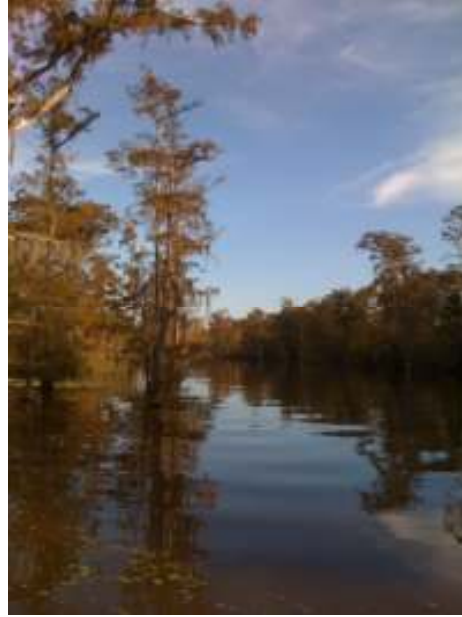
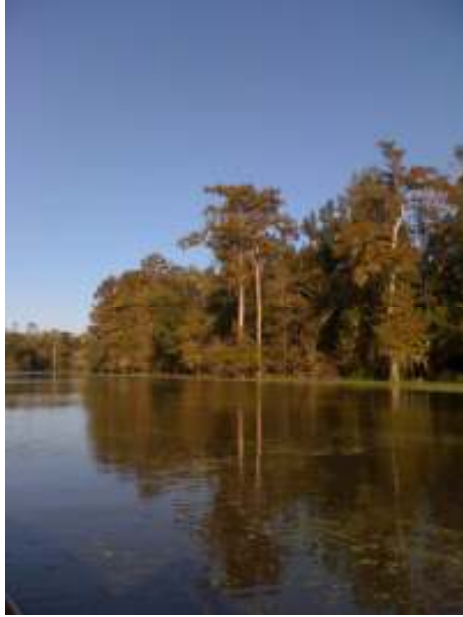


Today I was going to explore the Marsh area of the Basin with my good friend and host Donnie Courtney. Donnie knows how to navigate and it would help finding the “express” lanes thru the marsh and working as a Team we could cover more water. Well we headed down the Atchafalaya River and then ran some dead-end canals. I had a nice 3 pounder right off the bat in some chocolate soup looking water. We headed deeper and deeper in the marsh and we could never find a consistent bite. It was time to burn some gas and look for good water. We spent a full day covering the just about everything from the river to the gulf all the way west past the Wax Outlet and then north to the Teche. It was a pretty disappointing day and 50 gallons of fuel later. But hey that’s part of scouting to find the areas you need. Especially on a vast fishery like this.



Practice Day Four:

Today I wanted to explore the northern basin even more. I felt there was something special up north. It has banks and helps keep the fish out of the marsh and woods. A key aspect I've learned on the basin in high water situations. I explored a lot of water from Bayou Pigeon to Bayou Sorrell and only had two bites on the frog. It was disappointing but one thing I learned they loved that frog, especially early in the morning. About noon I decided it was time to head further north and try to get above the dirty inflow. I ran up and checked the Upper Flats and East Side Level canal and some natural lakes. I kept thinking about fishing the deeper channel banks and then seen some bait flickering in the flats. What the heck. I went over and started fishing the flooded cockle burrs and immediately started catching some fish on the spinnerbait. I managed to catch several non-keepers and caught two that measured just over the legal limit. This was another possibility. But I was really disappointed and had burned up another 50 gallons of fuel and covered thousands of acres of water.



Practice Day Five:



Today was my final day of practice and is the short day. I really needed something else to compliment the two areas I had found. Going North would be a gamble and going south I felt would get me a limit in the Teche but not the fish I needed to win. I decided to explore the lower basin just above Morgan City. Sometimes this water is clearer as there are many natural lakes and bayous that help filter the sediment. I fished several areas that have always produced in the past with no success. It was getting close to mid-day and my mind was not positive and feeling like I was wasting time. I had a big decision to make and needed to take care of preparing for Day One. I pulled off the water and got the boat gas and oiled. I had a couple items I needed some expert care so I went to the service yard to get them corrected. These guys deserve the biggest thanks and gratitude. They keep us going and make sure the equipment we have is tip top shape and ready to go. Mr. Lee from Skeeter Boats is not only one of the best on the road but he will stay as long as it takes to help any competitor not just a Skeeter owner. The last thing he wants to see a competitor side lined because they had something he could have fixed. The whole crew deserves a big thanks. They all pitch in to help each other.

The dock talk was 12 -13 pounds a day to win and 8 to 10 pounds a day to get a check. What was I going to do? If those fish up north bite and I can catch 5 a day I figure I could get 10-15 pounds but I would have to work hard all day to get 5 and not sure I had enough for three full days. I could go to the Teche beat it out with everyone else and catch 5 but they might go 8 to 10 pounds. My mind was smokin' which way to go.... So I let my friends from Facebook help me decide. We'll it was about 50-50. That wasn't much help. Then I got a call from my good friend...Elite Series Pro Jeff Connella he told me "You Don't Win a Horse Race saying Whoa, You win it saying Go!" That was it I was heading North. Do or Die to win this derby.

Tournament Day One:

I took off and was one of only a few boats that headed north from the Belle River Landing. The 60 Mile ride was very peaceful and I was pumped up when I hit the bayou. I started down the bank throwing my LuckyCraft Redemption Spinnerbait and immediately hooked up on a tigger. What a great start then a white bass surfaced. Wrong Species. But the baitfish were moving and the suck seed was pushed on the bank perfectly just ahead. I could hear a boat coming. No one else could have found this little honey hole. It kept getting closer. No that's a local fisherman. Then all of a sudden a white blur passed me and washed the bank and there went the duck seed up the bank and spread all over the bayou. I can't believe he didn't honor the boaters etiquette and idle buy at least a few yards. I kept pounding and trying to scratch out a fish but only caught two really shorts. It was approaching 10AM. It kept running thru my head I needed to head south catch a

little limit since this place was blown out. I would take an hour and half to run south. I finally gave in, I needed to make the move. We buckled down and made the long run to the Teche. After getting thru the lock and into the Teche I had about an hour and a half to fish. I moved to the first ledge and quickly started catching barely short fish. I kept measuring them and measuring them. But they were just barely short. Then I felt the familiar a smashing crush and a familiar tug. This one would go. Right at the boat it just came off. Then another and another. I lost four solid keepers just out of dip net range. What was happening. I don't lose fish like that on a crankbait. The hooks were extremely sharp. Just before I headed back to the lock I finally boated a solid keeper. As we started locking I noticed the needle on the fuel gauge was extremely low. I had not thought about all the miles I ran. So it was time for fuel conservation mode back to the ramp and the worse part it was up current all the way back. As I approached the dock it started sputtering. I'd made it in by the fumes. I ended the day with one keeper and 1-09 ounces and way back in the back, but not out of it. It was tougher than normal and a solid limit could get me back in it.

Tournament Day Two:

Today my mind was made up. I needed to catch a limit and try to make some money with a top 50 finish. I was Teche bound and not leaving today. I pulled in the first ledge and cranked up 7 shorts on my first seven casts then I finally put a weight fish in the boat. That little LuckyCraft SKT DR was gonna get me a check I knew. We kept cranking the deeper ledges as boat after boat went by and in-between me and the bank. I kept putting numerous fish on the measuring board what an extra 1/8 to 1/4 inch would do for me! The wind started blowing and it was time to put the wind in my favor on the ledges and I headed over to a shallow ledge and started cranking a LuckyCraft RC1.5, I quickly caught another just barely under then a solid keeper, then another. We fished a longtime and no bite so I turned around and caught another keeper. The anglers were beating the cypress trees and were complaining they had no luck. So I kept beating my stretch with the wind and could see on Side Imaging the bait fish busted up in really small schools. I just knew I could get 2 more off this bank. Then my co-angler caught one then I caught another one and he caught another one. It was getting late so I started scrambling hitting all the windy areas and key sections of ledges. I kept catching fish but they were all barely short or they would spit the bait at the boat. I managed to catch four today for 7-04 and made a move to 57th place. Just a hair over a pound out of money range. One more keeper would have done it.

Post Tournament Wrap-up:



The Tackle:

Daiwa TD Advantage Reels and Daiwa Zillion Rods

Mustad Thor Line in 8, 10, 12 and 14 Pound Test

LuckyCraft SKT Mini DR, LuckyCraft RC1.5, LuckyCraft Redemption Spinnerbait, Secret Lures Chubby Frog

The more I look at competitive fishing the more I think it involves making the right decisions. I made a decision on the first day to do what I needed to win the tournament but uncontrollable factors I fell kept me from obtaining the results I was hoping for. But sometimes you need to make decisions that put you in the highest odds of getting a paycheck. I have no remorse what I did but it still makes you wonder. "What if...?" Well that would be good to think about on the 15 hour ride home.

Tonight and tomorrow would be a time to unwind and relax. Tony Chachere was boiling 100 pounds of shrimp for anglers and the service crew. It was good time talking about what we did and what went wrong. It really helps to let it out and learn from others in the tournament. And tomorrow it was time to take some revenge on the Speckled Trout and Red Fish of the Lower Marsh.

Check out my Video of the Basin: Visit www.dougvaehrenberg.com

