

# *Blazing a Trail for a New Fishing Experience*

The Oak Hollow Fishing Trail is the first of its kind in North Carolina—hopefully, it won't be the last

Written by Mike Zlotnicki & Photographed by Thomas Harvey

Archdale resident Bill Frazier works a lure over a submerged structure on Oak Hollow Reservoir in High Point. The marked buoy indicates that the site is part of the Oak Hollow Fishing Trail.

**B**ill Frazier drives through Alabama regularly to visit his mother in north Florida. During his travels, he noticed a few billboards touting the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, a collection of 11 championship-caliber golf courses intended to bring golfers and tourism dollars to the state. A lifelong angler who prefers a cranking rod to a pitching wedge, Frazier began wondering if there might be a fisherman's equivalent. That curiosity led him to the Alabama Bass Trail, which doubles as a competitive tournament trail and a series of 13 ready-made destinations for visiting anglers.

Frazier, an Archdale resident and the conservation director for North Carolina Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (BASS) Nation, began to ponder how he could help do something similar in the Old North State. He imagined a youth-oriented, paddle-boat accessible fishing course that would be both educational and improve habitat in what he termed “stagnant, quiescent” lakes.

“The light bulb just came on with the golf trail thing,” he said. “The immediate thing that hit me in the forehead was youth and my fanaticism about getting young people fishing.”

Frazier's vision became a reality in 2016 with the debut of the Oak Hollow Fishing Trail. The course featuring 11 fishing sites scattered throughout the 800-acre Oak Hollow Reservoir in High Point was created through a partnership between the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, NC BASS Nation and the City of High Point. It features six “holes” where largemouth bass may be found in summer and winter, and another five in shallow-water habitats where fish are found in pre- and post-spawning times in the spring and in the fall.

Add it all together and the Oak Hollow Fishing Trail is the first of its kind in North Carolina, a spot that can serve as a fishing destination for avid anglers, an educational opportunity about the seasonal movements of largemouth bass and other sport fish, and a blueprint for the potential construction of similar sites across the state.

“The Commission was very excited to use this concept to create an educational fishing trail and teach new anglers about seasonal movement of largemouth bass,” said Wildlife Resources Commission Piedmont Aquatic Habitat Coordinator Mark Fowlkes, who led the Commission's involvement in the partnership. “We were also interested in the partnership with NC BASS and having youth help design, build and install structures. Getting new anglers and youth involved with fishing and habitat work is an agency goal. Fishing is not only fun but it also helps instill conservation ethics for future generations.”

### A Team Effort

Though Frazier has grand plans for his fishing trail, it came together through a series of small, inexpensive steps. As a water quality management professional, Frazier saw the environmental and financial benefit of creating a trail in small municipal lakes—instead of huge



The Oak Hollow Fishing Trail features three types of fish attractor structures made out of various pipes, tubes and concrete blocks. These structures include a “tarantula block,” top, “palm tree,” lower left, and “bass jacks,” lower right.

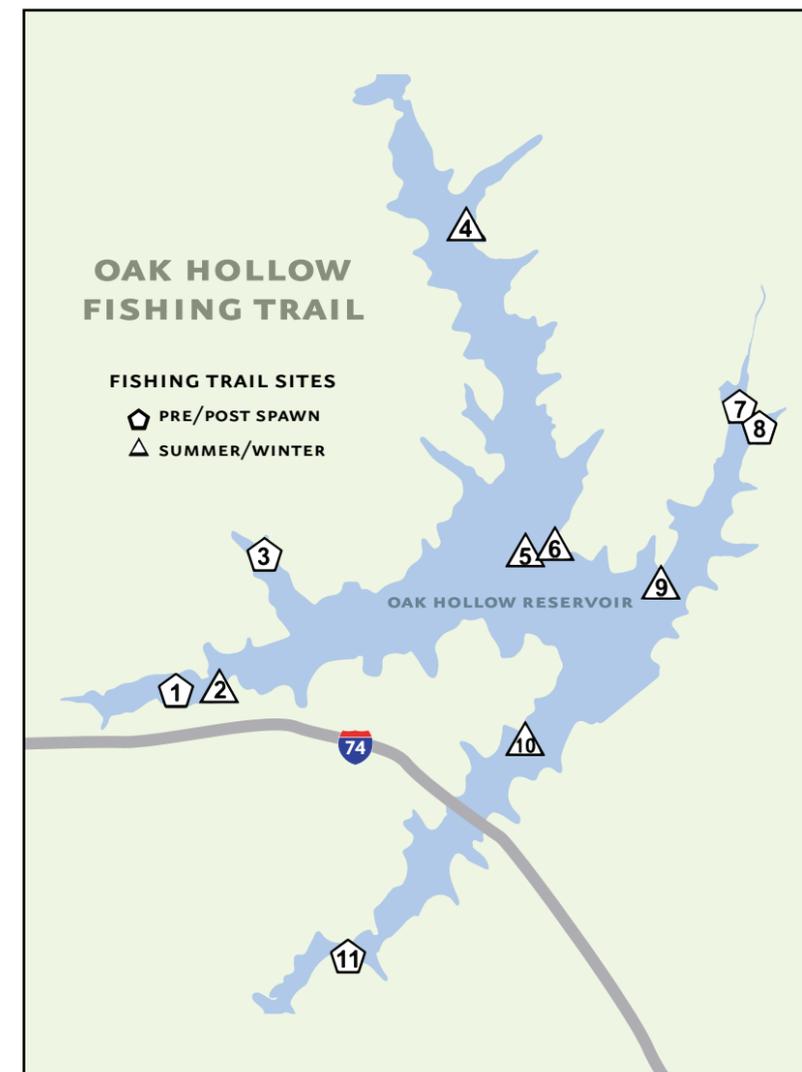
reservoirs—with a series of “holes” marked by buoys and consisting of artificial structures.

Frazier reached out to Fowlkes, who he had worked with on other wildlife habitat projects, and together they settled on Oak Hollow as the spot for the trail. They collected leftover materials from an old Boy Scout fish attractor project to repurpose for the fishing trail, and the Commission purchased additional materials for the structures. Frazier enlisted youth volunteers from NC BASS Nation clubs to help build the structures, and Fowlkes and Commission biologist Kelsey Lincoln supervised the construction and placement of them.

They made three different types of structures. One type, the “tarantula block,” consists of a cinder block with polyethylene landscaping tube zip-tied on and high-density polyethylene pipe cut into a “palm frond.” These cost only about \$20 to make per structure. Another type that proved harder to deploy consisted of half a plastic barrel cut with the “petals” folded out and weighted with rock. Another, dubbed the “bass jacks,” consisted of three plastic tubes attached in the middle that resembled the metal jacks and ball toy.

The team considered movement of largemouth bass when scattering 11 sites around the 800-acre lake. Six sites are where largemouth bass and other species frequent in summer and winter, like old roadbeds and uneven bottom near deep water. Five are located in shallower water where bass can be found in spring during pre- and post-spawning times and in the fall as they follow baitfish into shallower water.

To make the fishing trail easier to navigate for anglers, each buoy is marked at the top with one of two colors. Green denotes a depth and



location where one might find fish in the spring and fall. A buoy with blue at the top is where one would target summer and winter fish. In addition to largemouth bass, crappie and other sunfish can be found around this type of structure.

Frazier said that local anglers are catching on, too. “There’s a kid, Kevin Weber, running a guide service on this stuff,” said Frazier, referring to the Oak Hollow Trail. “He’s put together a YouTube channel and films out there once a week and this is all he fishes—this trail. It’s one of the best films we could have had in terms of advertising.”

This all sounds good to Lamar Lee, the marina manager at Oak Hollow Lake. He notes that it is too early to tell if the fishing trail has boosted business at Oak Hollow, but that he thinks “it’s a good idea. We’re excited to see how it goes.”

The original proposal for the fishing trail also called for putting structures around the fishing pier at Oak Hollow and in front of the benches where anglers fish. Structures were built specifically for these areas; typically, the Commission installs either fish attractors or feeders around their fishing piers. Just like the other sites in the lake, these will help attract fish for bank anglers.



### Building for the Future

Every angler who fishes the trail receives a pamphlet created by the Commission that includes a map of the sites (with GPS coordinates), information on the seasonal movement of largemouth bass, fishing techniques and the types of structures at each site. Perhaps most importantly, the pamphlet also includes a questionnaire anglers are encouraged to fill out about their fishing experience on the trail. While many anglers have been reluctant to complete the questionnaire, Fowlkes said this information is critical for the future success of the Oak Hollow trail and the construction of any future trails.

“Oak Hollow is a pilot project and the first of its kind in our state,” Fowlkes said. “In order for the Commission to expand the educational fishing trail concept to a lot of other reservoirs, we need information from anglers showing the project is successful and that the public wants more of these types of trails. Anglers don’t like to share where they caught their fish. Unfortunately, we need that information: where, what kind and how many. Even if they did not catch anything, we need feedback from every time an angler fishes the trail. This gives us valuable information to assess the project and helps us improve this and future trails.”

Long term, Frazier would like to see this idea take off across the state, perhaps nationally, and for NC BASS Nation to fund it.

“We never wanted this to be funded by the [Wildlife Resources Commission]. We wanted to pay for it,” Frazier said. “We have some

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grant opportunities now. Bass Pro Shops lets us raise funds at their sales by selling hot dogs that they set up for us. I’m on Lowrance pro staff and they are head-over-heels about the project. I think they’re close to donating more. It would be great to see this become a national initiative.”

First, it has to spread throughout North Carolina. Frazier wants local BASS Nation clubs to get involved and help with the maintenance and resurveying of the lake bottom to ensure that the structures are still in place. He believes that with proper funding, promoting and



The “bragging board” at the Oak Hollow Marina is chock full of pictures of big fish, including catfish, largemouth bass, crappie and hybrid bass. The fishing trail will make it easier to catch bass and crappie.

maintaining, the Oak Hollow Fishing Trail and future courses could become destinations for avid and recreational anglers.

“I want someone to pick up a travel brochure from the back of an airplane seat and say ‘I want to take my family and spend a week at the Oak Hollow campground and fish that lake.’ Or wherever,” Frazier said. “I’m the clearing house for these guys. If you come to me and tell me you want one of these in your lake, I’ll find a way to make it happen. ‘No’ is the wrong answer.”

Fowlkes notes that, just like with the Oak Hollow trail, constructing new trails will take time. He also stresses that this is not the only way for people to get involved.

“It will probably be a year before the assessment is completed and at that time consider building another fishing trail,” Fowlkes said. “It would be great if local fishing clubs were interested in helping to improve habitat in our reservoirs. If local clubs are interested in habitat work, such as establishing native vegetation, helping build and install fish attractors, etc., they should call their district fisheries biologist and discuss options. It is hard to create great fish habitat projects without having partners and volunteers to help make them happen.”

Mike Zlotnicki is the associate editor of Wildlife in North Carolina. He can be reached at [mike.zlotnicki@ncwildlife.org](mailto:mike.zlotnicki@ncwildlife.org) or 919-707-0175.