



Story & Photos by Larry D. Hodge

NOT YOUR AVERAGE FISHIN' HOLE

Quick: Where was every single largemouth bass stocked in public waters in Texas in 2013 hatched and reared?

Quick: Where do 13-pound bass caught anywhere in the state go to become prospective parents for the next generation of big bass in Texas?

Quick: Where do 30,000 people a year go to fish without a license and without running the risk of getting a ticket from a game warden?

If you were a little slow to answer any of those questions, it's probably because of the common human failing of not being aware of what's right under our noses. In all three cases, the answer is the same: the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center (TFFC) in Athens.

Many people who have lived in the area for years have never been to the fisheries center because they think they know what it is: just a fish hatchery. Boorrrring.

Wrong. Of course, it is +a fish hatchery, but not "just" a hatchery. Operated by the Inland Fisheries Division of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), the fisheries center impacts every bass angler in the state. As the primary (and in 2013, the only) producer of Florida largemouth bass for stocking into Texas pub-

TFFC DOES MUCH MORE THAN PRODUCE FABULOUS FISH

lic reservoirs, the fisheries center plays a huge role in making Texas bass fishing the best in the nation. The next time you have a bass on the end of your line, consider this: The chances are very good the fish either began life at the fisheries center in Athens or is related to one that did.

But TFFC doesn't raise just any old bass. It is also the home of the Toyota ShareLunker program, which uses 13-pound-or-larger largemouth bass in a selective breeding program to produce bass that grow bigger, faster. So far, 548 fish have been loaned to the Parks and Wildlife Department for that purpose, and they have produced about 1.5 million offspring that are swimming around in Texas waters waiting for you to catch them.

The ShareLunker program brings national attention to Athens and is in part responsible for the fact that East Texas lakes are major destinations for anglers from





stocked with channel catfish and sunfish year-around and with rainbow trout in winter. While you can bring your own fishing gear if you want, TFFC provides rods and reels, bait and basic fishing instruction. Blue catfish weighing up to 58 pounds, bass up to 10 pounds and sunfish over a pound have all been caught from the casting pond.

You don't need a license, and fishing is free with paid admission. There is no better place in Texas to take a youngster on his or her first fishing trip.

Connecting kids to the outdoors is one of the primary goals at TFFC, and two events in June are designed to do that. Every year, the first Saturday in June is free fishing day in Texas, and at the fisheries center, everyone age 12 and under is admitted free that day. The Athens Wal-Mart Supercenter provides free hot dogs, chips and drinks, and kids can enter a catfishing tournament and win prizes. It's a great way for a family to spend a day without spending a lot of money.

Also in June is the awards luncheon honoring Texas winners in Wildlife Forever's State-Fish Art Contest. Amazing works of art by young artists from across the state will be on display in the Hart-Morris Conference Center at TFFC on June 15. And if fishing doesn't light your fuse, there's also the annual "Fireworks at the Fishery" display on July 4.

The Fisheries Center is open Tuesday-Saturday, 9-4 and Sunday, 1-4. Admission is \$5.50 for adults, \$4.50 for seniors and \$3.50 for children 4-12. For more information, visit tpwd.state.tx.us/tffc.

across the nation. Fishing is a multi-billion dollar business in Texas, and everyone benefits — from the person who fills anglers' gas tanks to the motel that rents them rooms.

The mission of the fisheries center is more than just producing fish. Of the five freshwater fish hatcheries operated by TPWD, the fisheries center in Athens is the only one that is also a major tourist attraction. About 60,000 people a year visit TFFC. Visitors can enjoy seeing native Texas fish in the 300,000 gallons of aquaria, watch a diver hand-feed fish, walk a trail through a wooded wetland with an abundance of birds and other wildlife and even catch a fish. Or try to.

One of the attractions at the fisheries center is its 1.5-acre casting pond and associated streams, which are

