

Thanks to my friend and sometimes partner Jason King for the idea for this blog about "resisting the temptation to jump the gun in response to fall weather changes". Many fishermen get caught up in small changes in the weather during the months of September and October, and assume patterns will change based on temporary drops in water temperatures, when those things are essentially meaningless to the fish.

Most of us (myself included) are sick of the hot weather by the time the dog days of summer wind down, dove and duck seasons get underway, and Halloween Eve draws near. However tired we might be of the sizzling heat, no matter how strongly we long for cool, crisp mornings and brisk breezes, the weather gods have no concern for our needs. Last Tuesday, October 16, the high temperature in Corpus Christi reached 100°. While that was a record (by 7°) and the first time the triple digit mark was reached in October here, it's not unusual for us to have 20 or more days with highs in the 90s during this month, though it's the first full month of autumn.

Since the weather is so often hot between passing fronts, water temperatures don't stay low for very long. Accordingly, patterns related to cold water do not come into play in South Texas until much later in the season, normally around Thanksgiving. On the Upper Coast, they do come into play a little earlier in a normal year. Water temperatures dipping into the 50s and staying there for a couple or three days will trigger the onset of temperature-related patterns. Until such a variable is in place, other factors drive the patterns.

Generally, water temperatures are slightly cooler now than they were in July and August. The temperatures have moderated slightly mostly due to the shortening length of the days. Shorter days and longer nights mean cooler water overall.

Significantly, the "diurnal length", or duration of the daylight period, is one of the recognized triggers in the migrations of many creatures. It makes sense; the duration of the days is predictable when compared with the weather, which varies widely from year to year. Consequently, the internal clocks of many creatures are set in tune with the diurnal length, rather than ringing in response to short-lived, temporary phenomena like frontal passages.

I'm not suggesting that birds or fish don't respond to weather changes, simply that other factors are more significant in modifying their behavior, especially in transitional seasons.

Trout do not make migrations related to their spawning needs like redfish and flounder, but they certainly follow their prey species, many of which do make fall migrations. I've long contended the biggest challenge this time of year in trout fishing is locating the bigger fish, which seem to be tightly schooled when they are found. If I'm right, and trout tend to travel in tight bunches this time of year, following migrating bait, wise anglers will attempt to locate those migrating

schools of bait if they want to consistently locate the trout.

Obviously, one way of doing this is to locate flocks of hovering gulls. "Working birds" are one of the most reliable signs pinpointing the locations of migrating herds of bait and the schools of trout which prey upon them. Mostly, the trout caught under the squawking gulls will run between about 12 and 21 inches. I'm not suggesting the way to locate trophy trout in the fall is to fish working birds; I mention the pattern to show its relation to what might be occurring among the larger trout.

A big trout prefers to eat other fish, rather than shrimp, so locating large schools of migrating bait fish is a key to locating schools of big trout in autumn. In Lower Coast bays, those bait fish might be piggy perch, needle fish and ballyhoo, whereas on the Upper Coast, they might be menhaden shad. Mullet can be the target too, of course.

Locating these migrating schools and the trout following them is easiest to do when the bait fish are jumping and easily seen. If they are not, they must be found through the presence of popping slicks or muddy streaks in the water. These things might be prevalent in a place one day, absent the next.

Staying with the fish in a transitional season means staying mobile and using all the senses. Spot fishing is perhaps at its lowest level of productivity. Despite the fact it's almost as hot as it was in July, summer sweet spots with shallow shelves and structures close to deep, moving water are largely void of fish. Winter holes along shorelines protected from cold winter winds are not yet significant to the fish.

The most productive places to fish in autumn lie along the migration routes used by prey species to move from the bays to the Gulf. Cuts and drains connecting marshes to the open bays are good. All kinds of ditches and guts are too. Areas where the bays become narrow and funnel currents make it easier to locate fish passing through.

Often, when a front rolls in this time of year, it perks us up, makes us yearn to be out on the water. Crisp autumn air is a sentinel for the coming winter, but it can be a misleading messenger. Getting ahead of oneself and fishing cold weather patterns this time of year is usually unproductive. Versatility, mobility and vigilance are more important keys to consistency in this time of change.