A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a compound bow. The person is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and a silver metal watch on their left wrist. The bow is blue and black. The background is a dark green, textured surface with a bright green lightning bolt striking down on the right side.

# Bowfishing for Tilapia

story by **Dustin Vaughn Warncke**

# HUNTING *Water* GHOSTS

**B**owfishing for tilapia on lakes and rivers around Texas is a challenging and fun sport equivalent to coming face to face with a Rio Grande turkey or whitetail deer in the woods.

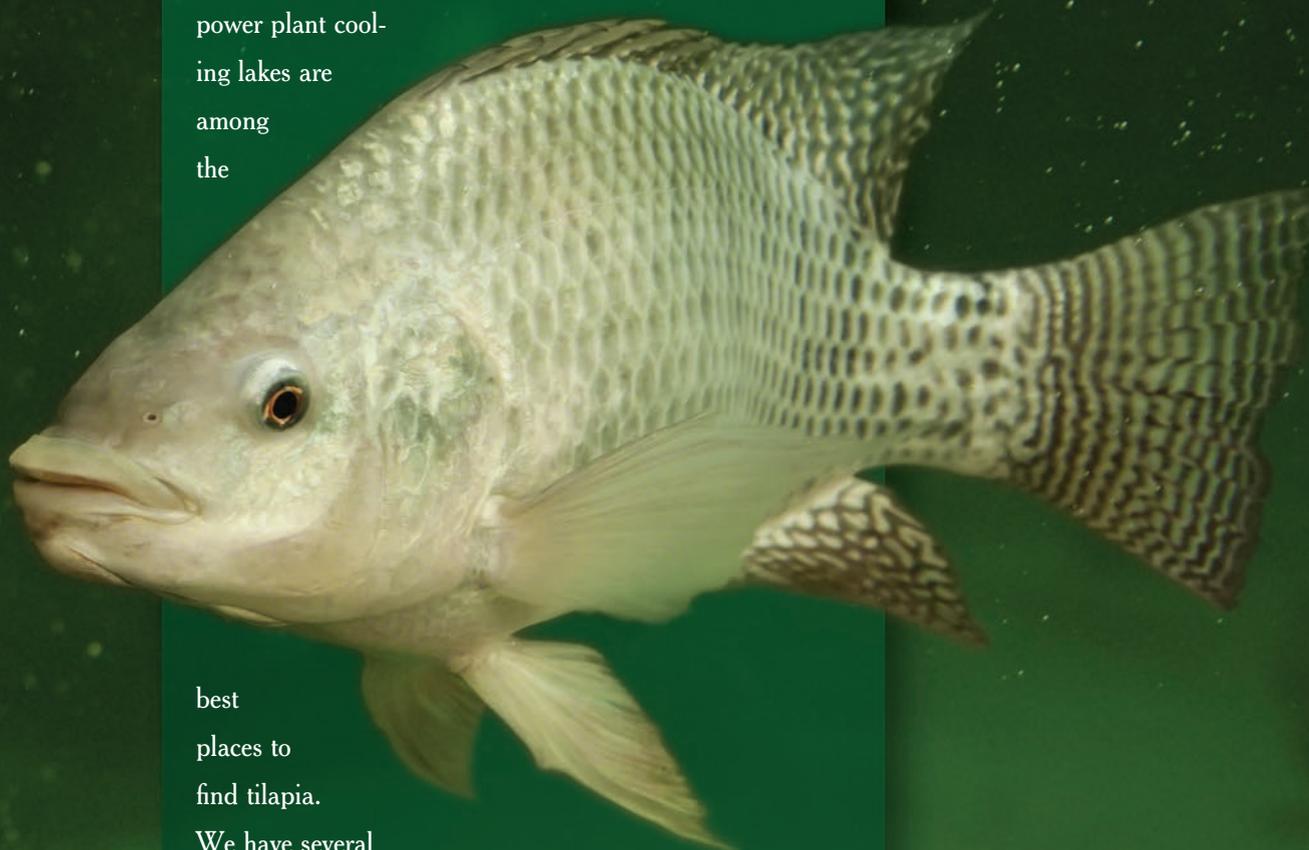
Tilapia are sensitive to movement and can disappear like a ghost, but they are also curious. This combination of characteristics makes bowfishing for tilapia among one of my favorite outdoor pursuits.

Tilapia are usually found in the southern United States as well as Central and South America where the climate is warm. Since they tend to thrive in warmer bodies of water, power plant cooling lakes are among the

best places to find tilapia.

We have several of these lakes in Texas such as Lake Calaveras, Lake Brauning, Gibbons Creek, Coletto Creek, Lake Fairfield, and many more.

Tilapia can also be found in other lakes and rivers. One example in South Central Texas, near my home town of New Braunfels is the Guadalupe River and Lake Dunlap. I have shot several tilapia on that lake over the years. One theory on how tilapia ended up in Texas rivers and lakes is that fishermen used to use tilapia to bait trotlines for catfish. Many of these escaped and reproduced.





**Cody Waxler Bowfishing on Lake Fairfield.**

The paradox regarding tilapia is that they are an invasive species, but they are also a fine fish for table fare, served in many fine restaurants across the world as well as available farm-raised in numerous fish markets.

Bowfishing for tilapia is comparable to turkey hunting in that tilapia can see very well and will bust you if they catch you moving even slightly before you shoot. This is why I call tilapia the “ghosts of the water.”

They are simply there one minute and gone the next, leaving a cloud of mud behind after they quickly swim away.

Most bowfishers would tell you that daytime is the best time to go hunting after these fish. On clear water rivers and lakes, tilapia are relatively easy to see, but you can see them even better with a good pair of polarized sunglasses. Remember, though you can see the fish easier, they can see you too.

You can bowfish for these fish by trolling around the edges of the lake in two to seven feet of water, much like bowfishing for other species. Go slow and keep your eyes open for them. My main strategy for bowfishing is to pull up into a patch of aquatic vegetation and find an area where there is a clearing with relatively calm and clear water.

Anchor your boat and wait, with your bow in hand, ready to draw at any second. Typically, tilapia will peek out to look at you, exposing an easy shot. The moment you see one come out close to the surface for a look, shoot!

Tilapia are a curious fish and their curiosity usually leads to a shot opportunity if you are fast enough. You can put dozens of fish in your ice chest if you can beat them at their own game.

The two things you will most likely fight in bowfishing on power plant lakes is cast-nets and wind. Cast-nets usually stir up an area trying to fill the bottom of their boats with fish, making it harder to find tilapia for a couple of hours. The wind can push you around off your favorite spot and ripple the water, making it harder to see the fish. If you can avoid these two factors, it makes bowfishing so much easier.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make, and I am thoroughly guilty of this, is to point out the fish to your bowfishing buddies before you shoot. Remember, tilapia can easily sense movement. When they do, expect to see a cloud of mud as they dart back into the cover of vegetation. Poof! Just like a ghost.

If you don't have a boat and only bank access to a river or lake, try wade fishing around aquatic vegetation. Again, look for calm and clear water and areas where you can get a clean shot. Then wait and ambush the curious fish as they come up for a look at you.

My friend, bowfishing guide Marty McIntyre ([www.GARQUEST.com](http://www.GARQUEST.com)), recommends using a six foot or larger ladder for wade fishing. Just place the ladder in the



**Our group's bag from the last trip to Lake Fairfield.**



Marty McIntyre from GARQUEST Wading and Bowfishing on Lake Fairfield.

Innerloc H2O. The damage to the fish is pretty minimal, but a point like this really holds the fish well, and it allows for fast fish removal.

If you get into a hotbed of tilapia bowfishing action, you can have great fun shooting and reeling in fish. Remember to have some back-up gear such as spare bowfishing arrows to make sure you can keep fishing in case you lose or break an arrow. I also recommend having extra tips in case the tip you are bowfishing with gets dull or bent from striking a rock or other hard object.

However you choose to approach bowfishing for tilapia, you are most certainly going to have fun doing it. I assure you that the adventure is well worth the trip, if you have tilapia near where you live or can travel to a place that has them. Remember to aim low, think big, and have fun out there.

See more of Dustin Warncke's outdoor adventures at [www.dustinsprojects.com](http://www.dustinsprojects.com).



water and climb to the top. This allows you to get a better vantage point to ambush your quarry when they come out of hiding.

Many bowfishermen even take it a step farther and wade a tripod hunting stand out to a good spot on the water. They then climb up the ladder, sit down and wait for the

action to start. Bowfishing like this closely resembles bowhunting on land. Many lake authorities do not mind you bringing in auxiliary equipment like this because these are invasive fish.

For bowfishing points, I recommend a two-barbed tip such as the Pro-Point from

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