A bass caught by Ken Addington on Valley Lake, a private reservoir near Savoy, in North Texas, on November 25, 2024.

Photograph by Bill Sallans

HUNTING & FISHING

The Men Spending $1,000 a Day in Pursuit of Big Bass

Meet the weekend warriors stalking double-digit lunkers on the state's many private lakes—which themselves cost landowners small fortunes.

By Ryan Krogh

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There's a fine line between passion and obsession. In the world of stalking largemouth bass, that line comes in at the ten-pound mark on a scale. For most anglers, a fish weighing in the double digits is the catch of a lifetime. A brag most drinking buddies can't top. A freak outlier

that's part ecological kismet, part piscatory prowess, and a whole lot of damn luck.

For Ken Addington, however, ten pounds is just a really good day. His target range when going after largemouth starts at around eight pounds. At least that's what he'll have you believe, especially while reeling in fish after fish on a cold November afternoon. "That's an eight-pounder there . . . with four pounds missing after the hook set," he jokes while cranking in another four-pound specimen.

We're not on one of Texas's storied bass reservoirs—Sam Rayburn, Toledo Bend, or Lake Fork—where anglers can go anytime they'd like. Instead, we're patrolling a narrow channel on **Valley Lake**, a private 1,100-acre impoundment near Savoy, a little more than an hour northeast of Dallas. It was commissioned in 1959 to serve as a cooling reservoir for a TXU Energy power plant, which operated along the shore for nearly fifty years until the facility was decommissioned more than a decade ago. In 2019, Luminant, the energy company that owned the entire 2,300-acre property, known as Valley Lake Ranch, **listed it for $24.5 million**. An LLC owned by Texan Warren DuBose closed on it two years later.

When it was created, Valley Lake, with a maximum depth of roughly 35 feet, was stocked with catfish, crappie, freshwater drum, and largemouth bass, but it has rarely been open to the public. Apart from the occasional TXU executive (or local sneaking in), firsthand accounts were rare. It was the equivalent of Area 51 for anglers, whispered about at local barbecue joints and bait shops. Addington arranged access through the new owner's nephew, Justin DuBose, a land and ranch agent who is helping his uncle set up a hunting and fishing lodge on the property. For now, fishing is the primary activity, and it's restricted to paying clients like Addington, who fork over about $1,000 a day for the privilege. This marks his fifth trip to Valley Lake.

A 66-year-old sales manager for a water-treatment company, Addington lives in Trenton, outside McKinney, with his wife. He has five grown kids and two grandkids and doesn't get out in a boat as much as he once did. So when he does, he means business. He moves methodically, with no wasted effort—a

reflection of the four years he spent as a professional bass-fishing guide starting in the late eighties. From the back of DuBose's red-and-black Skeeter Zxr 20, Addington repeatedly casts out across the tawny water. Before the lure even hits the surface, he has his bait-casting reel engaged. From his elevated position in the stern, Addington, who's six feet one inch tall, smoothly switches between rod-and-reel setups. One minute he's heaving lures overhand for long-distance shots, and the next he's flip-casting them underhand to target a specific downed tree along the bank. DuBose, our guide for the day, operates the trolling motor through a remote control hanging from a lanyard around his neck.

A cold front has blown in, dropping the temperature into the low fifties. Winds howl at twenty knots. On just about any public lake, largemouth would become lethargic in such weather, and the angling would slow to a halt. Here, without regular fishing pressure to make them wary, the bass strike on every tenth cast or so. As he hucks another cast against the rocky bank with a six-inch articulated swimbait—a realistic-looking lure that mimics a small fish swimming beneath the surface—a gust causes us to swivel, our backs against the cold, just as Addington sets the hook on another largemouth. "Whoa, boy!" he says. Then, after assessing the actual size of the fight on the end of his line, he recalibrates. "Another one missing a few pounds."

Addington is a talker, on the water and off. He's the rare nonprofessional fisherman who can tell you about his lifetime haul of roughly four dozen double D's, as he calls them. He's caught six weighing more than twelve pounds. This is the equivalent of a beer-league ballplayer hitting multiple home runs in the majors.

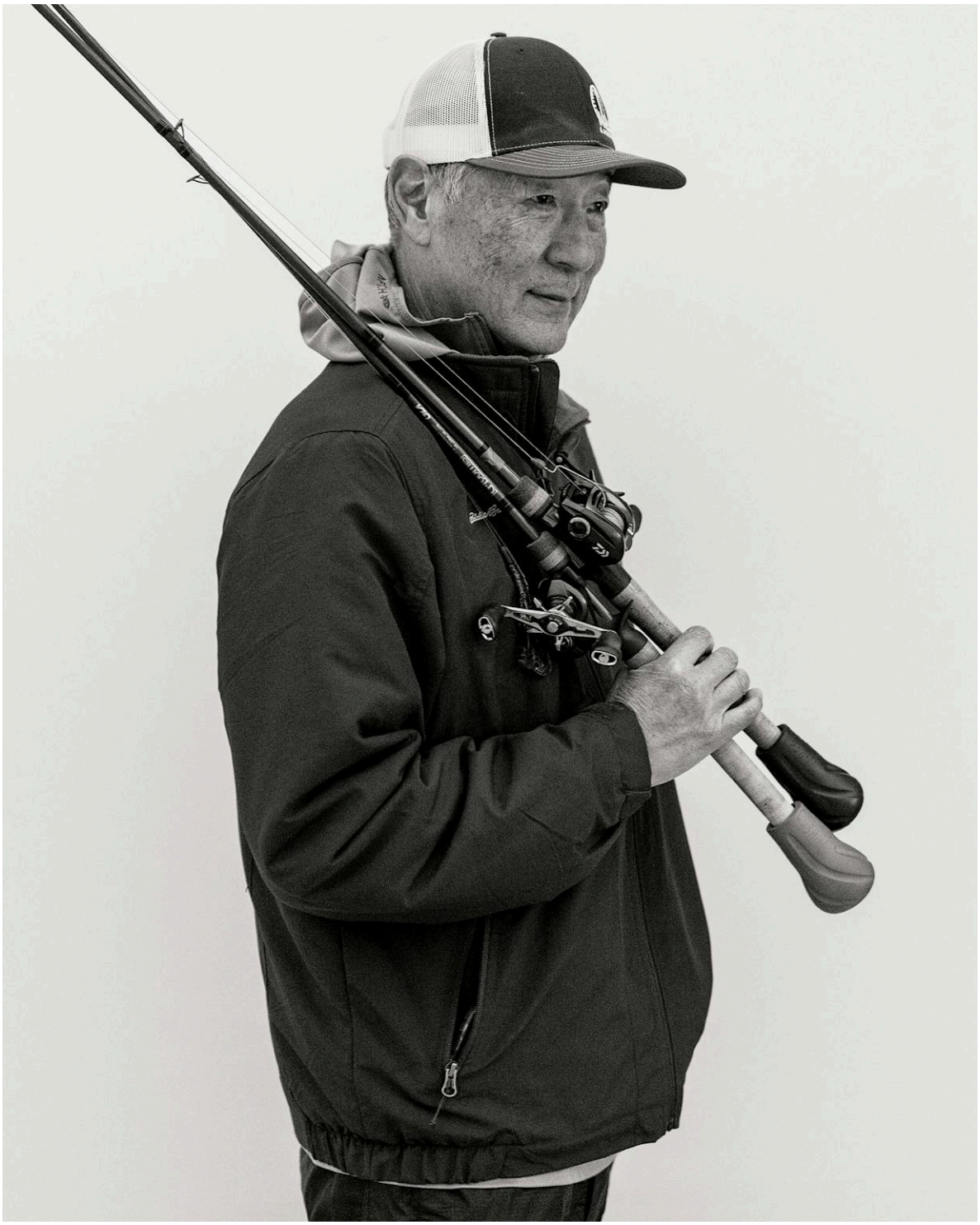
Addington and guide Justin DuBose on Valley Lake.
Photograph by Bill Sallans

Every fisherman dreams of the lunker—the honorific given to big bass, which for most Texans start at ten pounds—but an obsessive subset of avocational anglers like Addington try to land one again and again, no matter the cost. These are not professionals chasing big money on the tournament circuit, where consistency is more important than reeling in a single high-caliber fish. They're weekend warriors who lay out tens of thousands of dollars to catch a single big bass on one of the thousands of private lakes and ponds around the state, which themselves can cost a small fortune to build, stock, and manage.

These anglers are "CEOs in the boardroom and CFOs on the water—Completely Fishing Obsessed," says Steve Alexander, the co-owner of **Private Water Fishing**, essentially an Airbnb for lakes in Texas. The members-only fishing club, based in Richardson, caters primarily to the angler who wants to fish in the morning and make it back to his daughter's afternoon soccer game. But Alexander also has a few clients who will spend

thousands to catch a twelve-pounder. Most anglers chasing big bass on private waters are wealthy by any measure. Many are names you'd likely know, business executives in Dallas and Houston and politicians in Austin. These men—and they're almost all men—are often overachievers, type A's as driven to score a big win on the water as they are in their professional careers.

Addington proudly belongs to that group. "I never really drank, I never really partied, never got into drugs, because I pretty much spent all the money I had chasing bass," he says. "It did cost me one marriage, but it's kept me out of a lot of trouble too. The bass were the drug, and that feeling you get when you catch a big one, it's very much a high."



Addington.
Photograph by Bill Sallans

Largemouth is the nation's most popular game fish, but no state obsesses over big bass **quite like Texas.** It boasts more iconic fisheries than any other state. Our public reservoirs have produced double-digit lunkers in a way that few others anywhere in the world can match. A warm climate and an abundance of forage fish such as threadfin

shad and bluegill help bass grow quickly. There is also a state-run fisheries program, the only one of its kind in the country, focused on selectively breeding giant fish. Called ShareLunker, it aims to stock public reservoirs with the offspring of the largest bass.

In 2021, 4.3 million Texas anglers, both inland and along the coast, spent $4.6 billion on everything from boats—and the gas to fill them—to rods, lures, and lodging. As a lifelong angler and someone who's been writing about fishing for twenty years, I can assure you that a large portion of those people and dollars were likely chasing largemouth bass. **East Texas's Lake Fork**, for example, about fifty miles north of Tyler and one of the most important bass fisheries in the state, recorded $9.1 million in direct fishing revenue in 2021. On Sam Rayburn Reservoir, about eighty miles north of Beaumont, fishermen dropped $10.1 million in 2022.

Even for the average angler, expenses can add up quickly, but the ones going after big bass spend thousands of dollars each year. Some drop thousands each month. And some spend that every time they hit a private lake.

Many use boats that are designed to run fast—60 miles per hour or more—with the sides of their hulls only inches off the water. These vessels generally go for upward of $100,000, especially when outfitted with GPS-enabled trolling motors (around $3,000), shallow-water anchoring arms (about $2,000), forward-facing sonar (starting at $1,500), and high-performance tackle. Rods can cost a thousand dollars. Same with reels. Most serious anglers keep a minimum of six rod-and-reel combos stashed in their boat, along with dozens of plastic boxes full of jigs, crankbaits, spinnerbaits, jerkbaits, swimbaits, and hundreds of variations of **plastic lures** that imitate worms, lizards, frogs, and crawdads.

Some lures can cost as much as a rod and reel. A single swimbait from North Carolina's **Tater Hog Custom Fishing Lures**, the gold standard for many big-bass anglers, can set you back almost $300. A glide bait—a hard plastic bait that swims in a realistic manner—from a popular Texas line, **3:16 Lures,** based in Emory (a town near Lake Fork), sells for $280. When I asked Addington how much he's spent on lures, he demurred. "What's the opposite

of exaggerate?" he asked, laughing. "Because that's what I need to do." After a few seconds of mental math, he responded more honestly. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I want to know."

It all started **with a fish called Ethel.**

In November 1986, fishing guide Mark Stevenson was trolling in a side channel of Lake Fork when he pitched a jig-and-craw-worm combo into a submerged brush pile and hooked into what would become the most famous bass in America.

Until that point, the largest lunker in Texas—caught earlier that year on Lake Pinkston (about ninety miles southeast of Tyler)—had clocked in at 16.9 pounds. When Stevenson pulled his catch into the boat, it came in at 17.67 pounds and 27.5 inches long, with a massive 24.5-inch girth—the size of a large brisket. Stevenson's fish was still nearly 5 pounds shy of the world record of 22.25 pounds, for a legendary bass caught in Georgia in 1932. What made Stevenson's largemouth so important, besides the Texas record, was that he kept it alive in his boat's live well. After he reported it, state biologists raced over to do the official measurements and transfer the fish to a holding tank.

It didn't hurt that, in the media blitz that followed, the late *Dallas Morning News* writer Ray Sasser asked Stevenson what he was going to call her. "It just popped into my head," Stevenson later recounted: "Ethel."

The clamor around Ethel established Texas as a big-bass state. Anglers from around the country began flocking to Lake Fork. Every year from 1988 until 1992, the reservoir produced at least one lunker over 17 pounds. In 1992, Barry St. Clair, a rancher from the small town of Klondike (eighty miles northeast of Dallas), landed the still-standing state record: 18.18 pounds. It wasn't until 2022 that another 17-pound bass was caught in Texas, at O. H. Ivie Lake, a nearly 20,000-acre reservoir an hour east of San Angelo.

Ethel was more than a symbol. Biologists brought her to a state fishery in Tyler. This marked the beginning of the **ShareLunker program,** which is now based at the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center, in Athens, about seventy miles southeast of Dallas. The original goal was threefold. By selectively breeding largemouth weighing more than thirteen pounds, the state could use its brood to populate lakes with genetic strains that would create new generations of bigger and better bass. By keeping the largemouth alive, it would also help promote catch-and-release fishing, which was far less common in the late eighties. The third objective was simply to get everyone excited about bass fishing here.

Stevenson's catch "helped the whole economy of Texas, because people wanted to come to Texas to fish," says Allen Forshage, the former director of the fisheries center. "We did everything right with Lake Fork," he says. Before the dam was completed, in 1980, Texas Parks and Wildlife employees stocked ponds in the basin with Florida largemouth bass, a strain of bass native to the Sunshine State, which grows quicker and larger than Texas's native species. They also kept a lot of timber intact in the basin, so once it was flooded, the trees would create shelter for the fish, or what anglers call "structure." Biologists stocked the new lake with forage fish such as shad and bluegill. Then they changed the management of the lake itself, upping the size limits for keepers, so the bass could grow bigger. "We knew it was going to work, to produce a state record. It was just a question of time," Forshage says.

Ethel died in 1994. But her legacy lives on at the Lunker Bunker, the nickname for the holding ponds at the Athens fisheries center, which I visited in December. From the outside, the warehouse that's home to the bass looks more like an industrial canning factory than a breeding facility. But inside sit 22 light blue water tanks, each the size of a large inflatable pool. When full, these tanks house one of the world's largest collections of massive bass. Water pipes crisscross the room, which also features large mason jar–like containers to keep water circulating over bass eggs and long metal troughs to hold the newly hatched fry until they're big enough to have a decent chance of surviving in outdoor ponds.

"There's six different generations that we can trace all the way back to ShareLunker Number Nine," says Natalie Goldstrohm, the program's coordinator. She's referring to the ninth fish entered into the program, a 16.13-pound Florida-strain largemouth caught in 1988 in Gibbons Creek Reservoir, twenty miles east of College Station. One of the latest offspring from this fish was a 14.83-pounder caught in 2021 in Lake Coleman, outside Abilene. "There's no one else that's better at big bass," she says. "I mean, we've been doing it almost forty years."

Inside the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center, in Athens.

Photograph by Bill Sallans

The center’s holding and raising ponds.

Photograph by Bill Sallans

The obsession with massive largemouth extends to private landowners too. Without access to the ShareLunker spawn, they happily dump tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of dollars a year into attempting their own feats of engineering, managing their lakes and ponds to produce giant fish.

Out of the roughly one million water impoundments in Texas, tens of thousands on private land likely support bass populations. “Today there are more private lakes being heavily managed for bass than ever before,” says John Jones, the president and founder of **Lochow Ranch Pond and Lake Management**, based in Bryan. The company, which designs and builds bodies of water for landowners, is the largest of its kind in Texas. “Historically, it was predominately the über-wealthy who had the resources to create a world-class fishery on their property,” he says. “But now, as big ranches have been split up, we see smaller ponds become somebody’s pride and joy, and they treat it like that too.”

In January I went with Jones to a private lake in East Texas that his company manages. The 85-acre impoundment, which I agreed not to name at the owner’s request, is on track to produce fish larger than 15 pounds in 2026. Already the lake is churning out 12-pound bass. I tagged along as Jones and three Lochow Ranch employees assessed the health of the water by conducting one of their monthly electrofishing surveys, a common, safe process in which they shock certain sections to count the number of fish in the vicinity that are stunned.

As fog danced above the water, we pushed off the bank onto the lake. A long boom with two chandelier-like electrode arrays extended from the front of the aluminum-hulled boat. When activated, an onboard generator sent electricity pulsing through those arrays, gently stunning any fish within a roughly ten-foot radius. Jones and I stood in front of the boat with long insulated nets, scooping up fish as they floated to the surface. As we idled, everyone aboard, including the lake’s owner, called out directions of upwelling fish. “On your left.” “Behind you.” “Bass coming up!” We scooped up the catatonic bass and flipped them into a large live well. After ninety

minutes, we tallied the bass and weighed and measured each one: 49 total, with the two largest coming in at more than 8 pounds.

"This lake is one of the best bass lakes in Texas today, and it could easily be the best [one] that's privately owned," Jones told me later, as we sat around the owner's fishing lodge. Getting to this point wasn't easy. In 2020 the lake, which is decades old, was drained. Jones and his employees dredged the bottom to make the water flow more easily and create more depth in the upper reaches. Once it began raining, filling up the basin, they brought in a smorgasbord of forage fish: bluegill, redear sunfish, fathead minnows, threadfin shad, and golden shiners. Then came the fingerling Florida-strain bass, which Lochow Ranch grows in its private ponds. Within two years, the owner caught a nine-pound bass, and he has since reeled in multiple fish heavier than ten pounds. But he and Jones have also worked hard to keep the lake healthy, treating it as necessary for excessive vegetation. They've struggled to keep **river otters** from decimating the bass population and have resorted to traps.

On a smaller lake, one with fifty acres or fewer, all of this work can be relatively manageable, even if it costs at least several hundred dollars, and as much as several thousand, per acre every year. That's why, to raise big bass, many lake owners prefer to go small.

When Steve Alexander bought Private Water in 2010, he imagined mostly helping anglers score excellent fishing days. Over the years he's signed up roughly a hundred landowners, who offer access to their lakes to about a thousand members. These anglers pay a $465 annual fee and then an additional access charge, usually ranging between $70 and $275, to go out on a lake. The owners are compensated, but Alexander offers something they need more than cash: expert guidance on improving their fishery.

He breaks down proper lake management into five pillars: good water quality that creates a plankton-rich environment; a thriving population of forage fish; plenty of underwater structure such as sunken trees; good genetics in the fish; and a regular harvesting program. For many, the last principle is the hardest to abide. The smaller bass need to be culled regularly; otherwise,

they eat too many of the forage fish. “I always use this analogy,” Alexander says. “If you have a cow pasture, you can only have so many cows in that pasture. If you crammed a thousand head of cattle into a hundred acres, there’d be nothing for them to eat.” Like Jones, Alexander conducts regular electrofishing surveys for many of his clients, removing every bass they catch under a certain size; these are either filleted and stashed in a freezer or left out for buzzards, coyotes, and other scavengers.

Even with a rigorous management regimen, lakes tend to plateau in their production of big bass. Such fish spawn thousands of small bass, who inevitably compete for the baitfish. Plankton growth often tapers off, causing a decline in baitfish populations. Drought stresses the fish, which have less water to call home. Otters invade. The big bass tend to die off first, because they, like aging athletes, simply can’t compete with the young ’uns. The owner can still enjoy a good fishing lake, but not one that will produce a record. “Everything needs to go right,” Alexander says. “And so much of it is outside environment stuff—it’s the cormorants, it’s the otters, it’s flooding or the droughts. All of these are very hard to control.”

A largemouth bass in Valley Lake.

Photograph by Bill Sallans

Addington’s favorite plastic swimbait, in a shad pattern.

Photograph by Bill Sallans

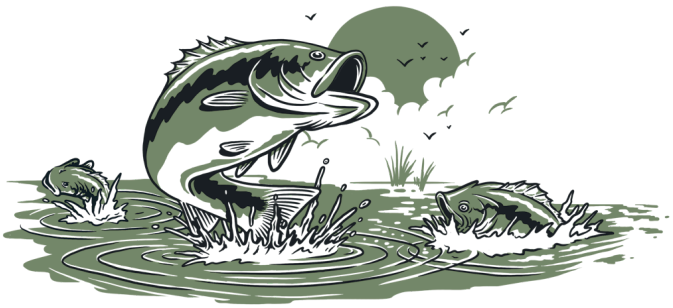
Sometimes the best course of action is to drain the lake and start over. A ten-acre lake called **Pecan Gap**, about thirty miles north of Denton, is a case in point. In 2011 owner Craig McGee dug it out to a maximum depth of twenty feet and carved out the upper reaches so they would be eight to ten feet underwater when the lake was filled. That extra depth helps prevent weed buildup. He adds tilapia annually, and last year he dumped in about 20,000 shad. He plans to add an aeration device to prevent the bottom of the lake from getting stagnant.

"It's like any hobby that turns into an obsession," McGee says. "You just go, 'Well, if we're going to do this and I've spent this much money, I might as well do that too.' Then it gets to be a bragging rights thing." The biggest bass to come out of Pecan Gap weighed in at fourteen pounds two ounces. McGee caught the lunker himself and loves talking about landing it, but he takes more pride in raising it. "You're always learning a little bit when managing [a lake], and you can be as active as you want to be," he says. "I know that there's a lot of people that will feed thousands of pounds of goldfish every month to their lake to raise big bass. Just like car racing, you can go to any extreme you want."

For most landowners, though, starting over is just too expensive. "It's very hard to convince a seventy-year-old man to drain his lake and wait five years for it to start growing big fish again and maybe ten years before they mature," says Alexander. "Most guys are like, 'S—, I'm seventy . . . I ain't going to smoke fifty grand to drain it and start over.'"

There's no guarantee, either. One of Alexander's clients dumped tens of thousands of dollars into a lake he had been developing in East Texas over many years. He added countless tilapia, shad, and bluegill that his big bass could feast upon. He fertilized the lake regularly to boost the number of plankton and create an optimal level of visibility underwater so that the bass couldn't tell the difference between a lure and a forage fish. Then one afternoon he came home to find that otters had invaded the lake and decimated the bass population. Jones acknowledges the risk. "There's a lot of

work that goes into growing true trophy bass, and a catastrophe is sometimes outside of your hands," he says.



ShareLunker is a breed apart

40 years of wild success.

Texas's ambitious, elaborate bass-breeding initiative began in 1986 after Lake Fork fishing guide Mark Stevenson gave his record catch—a 17.67-pound bass he'd later call Ethel—to researchers. Now known as the **Toyota ShareLunker** program, the initiative is supported through corporate and private sponsorships.

Every January 1 to March 31, during the spawning season in Texas, anglers who catch thirteen-plus-pound fish—all of which are female, because males generally top out around ten pounds—can contact the ShareLunker program. A state biologist will rush to take possession of it and bring it to the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center, in Athens.

In the past four years, more than eighty fish have been submitted to ShareLunker, but because there's room for only nineteen in the center's Lunker Bunker building, many of the bass don't make it into the spawning program, called the ShareLunker Legacy Class. When a catch does get accepted, it's given a number according to the order in which it was caught and is eventually paired with the offspring of other ShareLunker bass. After spawning, the fish is returned to the angler.

Everyone who submits their thirteen-plus-pounders, regardless of season, receives a Catch Kit, which includes a ShareLunker decal,

sponsorship merchandise, and the chance to win $5,000. Similar giveaways are available for ShareLunker-eligible fish that weigh less than thirteen pounds.

Ken Addington would rather spend his money fishing someone else's private lake. As a kid growing up in Garland, just northeast of Dallas, he was obsessed with the sport. He was born in South Korea in 1958 and at age six months was brought to the U.S. by an American couple who adopted him, making him one of the first Koreans to receive U.S. citizenship after the end of the Korean War. His mom would take him fishing when his dad was away driving trucks for a food company. His first lunker came in January of 1975, when he caught the biggest largemouth in a school tournament. During the late eighties and early nineties, when the fishing at Lake Fork was at its peak, it was all Addington cared about. He became a guide, to the detriment of his personal life. Once, after working on the water for almost twenty straight days, he came home to find a note from his wife on the fridge: "We need to talk."

"That's never a good sign," he says. "But we hadn't been married long, didn't have kids, so it was a peaceful, amicable divorce." On the water, though, he was coming into his own. His calendar was booked, thanks to his reputation for leading clients to big bass. He was guiding almost exclusively on Lake Fork.

Back then, Addington was a bit of a show-off on the water. Five of his boats, which were painted bright orange or yellow, could run faster than 100 miles per hour. "I didn't want to just catch the biggest fish; I wanted to outrun everybody getting to them," he says. "If you meet people at Lake Fork that know me, they won't talk about the big fish I've caught. They'll tell you about how I come flying past them one day in my hot rod Allison bass boat." One client, Steve Dumler, who had a standing reservation every Wednesday, eventually persuaded Addington to work for him at the water-treatment company he owned, ChemCal Incorporated. "He said, 'Ken, I know you're

making a living doing what you're doing,'" Addington recalls, "'but you're killing yourself doing it. It's not sustainable.'"

Addington became a salesman and worked for the company for nearly three decades. In 2019 he and nine ChemCal guys started Apollo Water Services in Texas. His business success enabled him to pursue his passion on the water. Some years he'd fish twice or more in a week. Other times, he'd focus only on the spring spawning season, when the bass are the biggest and can be found in shallow water on their spawning beds. Many of the big ones lay their eggs in bowl-like depressions they create in a foot or two of water, and you can spot them from a distance and essentially stalk them, like big game. It's one of Addington's favorite methods for catching lunkers.

Like any good fisherman, he has stories. The one he tells the most goes back to a January day in 2012 when he landed his largest bass ever, a fifteen-pound behemoth. He caught it at **Camelot Bell**, a private lake in Coolidge, about 35 miles northeast of Waco. "I remember everything," he told me one night over dinner. "It was chilly, the high was probably fifty, and it was a light north wind, six to eight miles per hour, partly cloudy. I was sitting in the back of the boat, throwing a half-ounce jig, green pumpkin colored, with a watermelon-red crawl worm on it. I'm throwing fifty-pound braid [fishing line]. With no stretch in the line, I immediately knew it was a big fish." After a frantic fight, he managed to get the bass in the boat. Addington and his godson, along with Mike Frazier, the owner of the property, tried to weigh the fish on a fifteen-pound scale, but the catch was too big. They had to use a thirty-pound version to confirm that the bass clocked in at an even fifteen pounds.

At the time, it broke the lake record, but it lasted only a few months. In March, a friend of Addington's from Fort Worth caught a bass a half-pound heavier. It stung a little, but Addington quickly moved on. "As soon as you catch a sixteen-pounder, you want to catch a seventeen."

Addington casting a plastic swimbait.
Photograph by Bill Sallans

Camelot Bell is one of three private lakes Frazier owns. He built the forty-acre impoundment from scratch in 1997, followed by two others: Round Table and Wolf Pack. When I visited Frazier at his home, a ranch house overlooking Camelot Bell and Wolf Pack, he told me he was born to raise lunkers, which he refers to as "pigs." "As a kid, I'd go by a piece of water and dream about what fish might be in it," he says. "And now I have these pigs here, but keeping them big ain't easy. It takes a lot of money; it takes a lot of dedication; it takes a lot of time. But there ain't nothing I'd rather do."

Along with his wife, Bertha, who manages the lakes' fishing schedules on an oversized printed calendar in the couple's living room, Frazier runs Camelot Bell Trophy Bass Lakes. He has built three cabins and a pool where guests can relax. But nobody comes here for the swimming. Camelot Bell and Wolf Pack are twin lakes, roughly the same size, separated by a low earthen dam. Passing them on a gravel road, you could easily mistake them for barren

ponds, but Camelot Bell is one of the best-known names among private big-bass lakes.

Before the current drought hit about three years ago, Camelot Bell churned out fourteen- and fifteen-pound bass. Frazier began charging $1,200 per person to fish it. Those who did so included some of the biggest professional names in the sport: Brent Chapman, Scott Martin, Jimmy Houston. They were coming home with stories of catching, in a single day, five fish weighing more than ten pounds each. Some went out on his lake as many as forty times over a couple of years. Addington scored his personal best day on Camelot, reeling in, along with a friend, five fish that weighed a collective 56.5 pounds. (For comparison's sake, the single-day tournament record for weigh-ins on the professional B.A.S.S. circuit is 45.2 pounds, set at Florida's Lake Tohopekaliga in 2001.)

While offering me a property tour in his Ford Raptor, Frazier referred to himself as a "mad scientist" of big bass. It's an apt description. He talks excitedly about pH levels, how many parts per million of calcium carbonate is ideal, and when to add lime and phosphate to boost photosynthesis and create more plankton. He maintains elaborate schedules to add tilapia and crawfish to the lakes at just the right time. He also culls smaller bass with a ruthlessness that would make most lake owners squeamish.

"People think you just put 'em in there and feed 'em good and they're just going to grow," he says of lunkers. "It ain't quite like that. You got to put 'em in there, yes, but now you got to take 'em out. If you don't take 'em out, there ain't going to be nothing left for 'em to eat."

Frazier attributes his success, in part, to the genetics of his fish. When he first created Camelot Bell, he sourced pure Florida-strain largemouth bass from a guy raising fish in Central Florida. Those lunkers, claims Frazier, grow bigger and faster than any others. "They have shoulders," he says. "That's why I never brought another fish into my lakes other than this strain." Frazier also sells the offspring to other landowners, in a private version of the ShareLunker program. The current lake record for Camelot Bell is more than 17 pounds.

He's focused on repeating this success with Round Table, an eighty-acre impoundment he created four years ago after buying a 256-acre spread southeast of Coolidge. Once he closed on the property, he hired a contractor to move hundreds of thousands of pounds of dirt to create a channel that, when the lake was filled, measured forty feet deep at its maximum. Round Table is full of flooded standing trees and includes flat shallows on its northern shore for spawning fish. Frazier stocked it with baitfish and fingerling bass from his other two lakes and breeding ponds. He also added 27 bass heavier than ten pounds. It's a huge gamble, in part because of the large size of the lake. Like most owners, he's had issues with river otters and cormorants, fish-eating birds that he calls "the devils from above." But Round Table is on track to produce double-digit bass for paying clients this spring.

"This," he says, "is my last hee-haw on everything I've learned."

Some of the ShareLunker Legacy breeding bass.
Photograph by Bill Sallans

Private lakes are primed for generating new records, but public reservoirs could easily produce them too. One at the top of the list is O.H. Ivie Lake.

The lake saw some good years after it was impounded, in 1990, but in 2014 its water levels hit a low, and invasive salt cedar trees took over its banks. The state continued to stock it with Florida-strain bass, so when flooding hit a few years later, raising the level dramatically, its fortunes turned. With lots of recently submerged habitat amid the salt cedars, the sunfish and shad populations spiked, which fed the young bass. They exploded in size.

Brady Stanford, a guide from Millersview, some forty miles east of San Angelo, witnessed the surge firsthand. Since he started guiding full-time in 2022, he and his clients have submitted nearly 75 bass weighing more than 8 pounds to ShareLunker. He's helped anglers catch four that were more than 13 pounds. Three years ago, Stanford crushed the world record for

meanmouth bass—a hybrid of largemouth and smallmouth—when he landed one that clocked in at 11.1 pounds on O. H. Ivie.

Most of his customers are looking to set their own record, even if it's just a personal best. Stanford uses the relatively new forward-facing sonar technology that has helped anglers target the biggest bass. It scans the water in front of a boat and projects a version of that view—weeds, muddy bottoms, schools of baitfish, and big bass—onto a screen. "With these new sonars, I can tell the size of a fish, so I'm just going looking for big fish," says Stanford. "I'm not wasting time on anything smaller than eight pounds." Anglers armed with forward-facing sonar have a significant tactical advantage over old-school fishermen. The technology has generated controversy in tournament circles and with everyday anglers over fishing ethics and unfair advantages. But for big-bass guys, it's just another tool.

Roughly half of Brady's clients are from out of state, and many are passionate fishermen coming to him to gain insights into sonar fishing. He charges $1,000 dollars a day from January through June and then $800 a day for the second half of the year. One customer, from Washington State, signed up for four straight days of fishing last year. He caught a ShareLunker bass on the third day. When he got home, he loaded up his boat and drove all the way back to stay for a month and ended up buying a house on the banks of O. H. Ivie. "He just retired and decided he had nothing better to do than come out here and chase big fish around," says Stanford. "Once you catch a big one, you just want to catch more of 'em."

Addington knows the feeling well. He's always looking for his next personal best. "It's like the actual fish is just the culmination of all the preparation, all the time, and all the thousands of dollars you've spent on tackle," he says.

Texas is uniquely situated, geographically and culturally, to channel our hardwired urge for one-upmanship into catching big bass.

"California and Florida have two things we don't have, and that's a longer growing season and [fewer] big temperature swings. So those states are naturally better," Addington says. "But in terms of what the state does to

grow big bass compared to any other state, I would tell you, nobody goes to the efforts that we do. Nobody spends the money that we do."

Almost certainly there's a record bass swimming around one of Texas's lakes right now. There's just too much water, too much effort going into raising a giant. Jones has weighed a bass of over 19 pounds that he netted during an electrofishing survey. On another of his client's lakes, he and his team missed an even bigger one.

"Everyone has a story of the one that got away," he says, "even us." To count as a state or world record, though, a bass needs to be caught on a rod and reel. But freak outliers that big do exist, clearly. A record bass may even have been caught in recent years and simply not reported to the state. Fishermen constantly share rumors of record bass being caught on private lakes in East Texas, some owned by hush-hush society clubs. The owner of the lake that Jones took me to said he probably wouldn't officially report a major catch because of the attention it would bring to his property.

All fishermen, even the biggest talkers, have their secrets.

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Illustrations by Alan Berry Rhys