

Plenty to see at the 2020 Fishing Show

Collectively, Texas' fisheries rank among the best on the planet. Our water produces quality and quantity across the board, from the shallowest bays and lakes to the depths of the Gulf of Mexico. Enjoying that vast playground, as a fisherman, takes lots of toys. And from March 4-8, during the 45th annual Fishing Show, they'll be stacked high and wide in the George R. Brown Convention Center.

It's appropriate that a show with so many rods and reels and lures and lines, boats and apparel and destinations to see be held, pun intended, in 2020. We'll call this one a feast for the eyes, and a great chance to get hands on gear that in many cases is being shown publicly for the first time.

The Fishing Show has served as a launching pad for innovation in recreational angling through four and a half decades. Most of the best that industry manufacturers has to offer is presented here, to Texas fishermen, first. If we like it, those tackle makers can be certain their products will pass muster anywhere.

Companies large and small continue to lean on Texas, especially coastal Texas, for feedback on new products. We're always in the market for toys – so long as they catch fish – and show visitors will get the chance to go hands-on with hundreds of the best and latest products for fishermen.

Like each show that's preceded it, this year's edition has booth after booth, aisle after aisle of eye-popping innovations. And all the better for show visitors, most of that gear is being shown by the people who actually developed, made and tested the products.

As is customary at the Houston Fishing Show, many of the booths will be occupied by factory representatives and professional fishermen. They're in place to explain how their rods should be fished, how their lures should be presented, and how we all can become better fishermen. You won't find a better opportunity to compare gear side-by-side.

The Shimano brand remains a frontrunner and favorite among Texas fishermen, and it brings another rack of outstanding reels to the show. Within its generous display area, you'll find updates and upgrades throughout their lineups of casting and spinning reels, including the new Metanium MGL baitcasters, hard-fighting SpeedMaster for serious offshore fishing, and upgrades to the popular Stradic family of spinning reels.

Look also for the latest from increasingly popular brands, such as 13 Fishing, and more traditional lines such as Daiwa, Abu-Garcia and Penn.

As many reels as there are in this show, there are at least as many rods. Major brands continue to find ways to whittle weight without compromise to strength and durability. Component parts have evolved, as well, to accommodate the increased use of braided lines and to tackle some highly specialized angling techniques.

The hottest new rods on the market will stand proudly in their racks, each looking for a new home in some Texas angler's quiver. Watch for new entries in the rod market from proven players such as Castaway, Shimano, Waterloo, Falcon and several brands new to the region.

The differences from one stick to the next can be subtle, nearly imperceptible in unskilled hands, so take advantage of experts and the knowledge they bring into the booths. If you're there on the right night, you may even run into the people who actually design and test new rods. Their feedback can be invaluable to anyone who's not sure which rod, among thousands at show visitors' fingertips, is right for a particular application.

For fishermen more interested in the business end of the line, there will be hundreds of new lure styles, size and colors available, every one of which is guaranteed to catch fishermen. It's hard to believe the soft-plastic lure industry began with only two or three offerings in fewer than a half-dozen colors, and harder to believe that lure makers continue to generate new names for their new colors.

Hard-plastic baits continue to regain ground lost to soft plastics. Watch for quality offerings from at least half a dozen new makers and some reintroductions of past favorites, such as MirrOlure's slow-sinking plugs, with subtle refinements that make them all the more irresistible to fish.

There will be plenty of retailers on hand, however, such as Fishing Tackle Unlimited, from which you can purchase those newest makes and models.

For the price of admission, visitors can get a PhD-level education in catching every fish that swims around Texas and a good many more that are native to other states and countries. There are no fewer than 20 premier fishing destinations featured at The Fishing Show, and they represent opportunities from the Amazon River to Alaska.

If Alaska is on your must-fish list, check out Bear Claw Lodge, Big Salmon Lodge and Salmon Falls Resort. Each offers quality fishing in one of the few truly wild places on the planet. Canada also is well represented by Tate Island Lodge on Reindeer Lake and, by float-plane only, Milton Lake Lodge.

Moving closer to home, you'll find trout guides from Montana, bass and catfish pros from most of Texas' big reservoirs, and great coastal pros from Texas and Louisiana and out to the Chandeleur Islands.

Once you've loaded your sack with new tackle, you may also be tempted to put eyes on a new boat. The Fishing Show features a nice variety of hulls, from kayaks to skiffs to open-water fish chasers, that can get any angler to the action wherever it may be.

Pay close attention to the kayaks and stand-up paddleboards (SUPs). The companies that make these boats know their market is hot, and they're adding features regularly to stay ahead of their competition.

Be sure to ask the folks who sell these downsized fishing machines how they can be customized beyond stock options. These boats can be rigged for any style of fishing and can carry electronics, navigation gear, and even high-definition cameras above and below the water line.

Increasingly, fishermen have become mindful of their clothing. At the show, you'll see some of the most high-tech clothing available to anglers, some of which is coming to market for the first time. Everything from hats to shoes has been modified in recent years to perform better and protect us top to bottom from damaging sun rays.

Most everyone who wears an "Exhibitor" badge at this show, whether they're display holds hooks or sunglasses, boat insurance or ice chests, is uniquely qualified to be there. Some are manufacturers' reps with years of experience. Others are factory personnel or even might be the person who invented the product in your hands. Take advantage of their expertise. Ask them how to fish their lures, cast their reels or choose the right sunglasses.

Whatever your current ability as an angler, you'll be at least a full grade higher after the show provided you take advantage of the knowledge at your fingertips. All the new tackle in the entire show is only as good as the fisherman using it. The pros on hand are men and women who make livings – good livings in many cases – doing as their jobs what we do for fun. Imagine yourself knowing some of what they know and taking that casting trick or presentation subtlety onto the water next time a buddy bets lunch he can outfish you.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department returns with staff who are up to speed on the latest rules and regulations on fishing. They're also handy with boating laws, which may have changed since your most recent registration or purchase. If you have children, ask about special youth activities and the state's nationally acclaimed restocking and hatchery programs, which pour tens of thousands of rainbow trout into small ponds around Houston every winter.

This year's seminar schedule is like the 44 that preceded it, packed Wednesday through Sunday with a lineup that reads like a Who's Who of Texas fishing. Specific times, topics and presenters are available daily at the door. Check that roster as you enter the show, and time your stay accordingly, or go to the event Web site (houstonfishingshow.com) to schedule your trip around a favorite outfitter or guide.

Families always are welcome at the Fishing Show, and there are plenty of special attractions for them. Be sure they spend time walking the aisles, too. Nearly all the exhibitors at this show recognize the future of their industry when they see it, and they're happy to hear children's fishing stories.

Those fishing stories, regardless of how true they may or may not be, are absolutely free and worth twice as much. Grab yourself some tackle, consider a lifetime trip, and enjoy the show.

Fishing Show hours are noon to 9 p.m. Wednesday through Friday; 10a to 7 p.m. Saturday; and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$15 adults, \$3 children 6-12. For more information, call 281-350-2741 or go to houstonfishingshow.com.

QUICK FACTS

What: 45th annual Houston Fishing Show

Where: George R. Brown Convention Center, Houston

When: March 4-8

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Contact: houstonfishingshow.com.