Where the Hunting is Easy and the Fishing is the Best

By Stephen DeLaney Hale

Tommy Thompson of Laurens, SC, has bagged birds and big game all around the world—from antelope in Africa to pigeons in Peru, Caribou in Canada and Wapiti (elk) in New Zealand. But he is still awed by the abundance of hunting right here at home. When he drives up to his house at dusk, he’s apt to surprise a half-dozen white-tailed deer in his backyard. “And I live in the middle of town!” he exclaims.

Thompson does most of his South Carolina hunting on his 600-acre farm in Laurens County that has been in his wife’s family for about 175 years. But he says there is an abundance of game all across the Old 96 District, a district which stretches from the wide Savannah River to the central midlands of South Carolina.

In the midst of the Old 96 District are over 100,000 acres of the Long Cane District of Sumter National Forest, much of which is open to public hunting under U.S. Forest Service guidelines. Thompson says the mostly rural district is teeming with game. “This is a wonderful habitat for small game including dove, squirrel, opossum, fox, raccoon and rabbits. And it’s full of large game. Deer and wild turkey are plentiful, and we have a significant goose population. Coyotes make good hunting, too, because they are so crafty,” Thompson says.

Whether you enjoy hunting, fishing, camping, paddling, birding, hiking, riding trails or simply relaxing, Sumter National Forest has something special waiting for you.

One of the other great hunting/fishing areas of the state is Santee Cooper Country. About 70 miles south and east of Old 96 District, the Santee Cooper area is named for the lake and canal system that joins the Santee and Cooper rivers. Just as the Old 96 area is known first for hunting and then its fishing, the Santee Cooper Country is the reverse. This area is a fisherman’s paradise.

Altogether the Santee Cooper area offers anglers 450 miles of shoreline, 171,000 acres of lake and over 1,000 campsites around the shores of those lakes.

Full of pristine rivers and streams, two canals and a vast swamp, Santee Cooper’s two centerpieces are lakes Marion and Moultrie. From these lakes have come the world-record channel catfish (58 pounds) and the state-record largemouth bass, black crappie, shellcracker and flathead. And only recently have fish from these lakes relinquished the world records for striped bass and Arkansas blue. Plus, for just plain good eatin’ there are plenty of bream in lakes Marion and Moultrie.

Pockets Carter, proprietor of Track Kitchen in Aiken, SC, is a big believer. He loves to hop in his truck right after lunch for the 90-minute drive to Santee, SC. “We put in the boat and catch a mess of crappie and bream, and then I set up the grill right on the shore. You’re eating fish 10 minutes after they come out of the lake,” he says with a wink and a grin. “You’ve never had fish that good!”

Both residents and nonresidents may now purchase hunting and fishing licenses at dnr.state.sc.us.