

# The Augusta Chronicle

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## COLUMNS

# Campbell Vaughn: Southern pine beetles wreaking havoc on Georgia's forested areas

**Campbell Vaughn** Columnist

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I have been trying to spend a little more time at the lake these past couple of months.

My friend Ed and I are trying to learn to catch fish on the 72,000 acres of Strom Thurmond reservoir. So far, we have had some success with catching a few catfish, which has been tons of fun, but we have a lot of work to do to become better.

In riding back and forth between Augusta and Lincoln County, and countless hours trolling for no fish on the lake, the sight of the pine trees dying in large numbers is staggering. I knew the Southern Pine Beetles (*Dendroctonus frontalis*) were out, but this year is off the charts.

In a meeting I attended with some area environmental educators, I visited with some of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that focus on shoreline management of the forest and other natural resources that surround Strom Thurmond Lake. They were discussing the hundreds of acres of pine forest that have been infested with Southern Pine Beetles in our area.

When infestation of this native insect takes place, hold on to your seats (and saws) because they can destroy a bunch of pine trees in a hurry.

The Southern Pine Beetle attacks and kills all species of southern yellow pines in Georgia.

Being about the size of an eye gnat, these tiny insects attack a pine by boring into the tree and constructing S-shaped egg galleries underneath the bark. These galleries cut off the vascular system that moves food and water throughout the tree. Adding insult to injury, the beetles also carry blue stain fungi on their bodies that clog the pores of the water conductive tissues within the tree.

Last week when I was walking around our family cabin, I could hear something that sounded like a person grinding their teeth. I pinpointed the noise about 50 feet away and walked up to

what I knew was not going to be a good thing.

The grinding sound is the insects chewing the inside of the trees. I looked down at the base of a massive pine tree and there was saw dust at the base. I looked up, and the tree's green needles had turned red, and I knew it was a goner.

Surveying the area, I noticed three other 100-foot pines were infested. Other signs of infestation included white pitch tubes, running pitch, and many small emergence holes in the bark of the tree.

Time to get the chainsaw fired up.

**Campbell Vaughn:** Several area trees and bushes can produce vibrant-colored leaves for fall

The southern pine beetle is the most destructive forest insect in the Southeast. If one beetle outbreak happens, it can wipe out hundreds of trees.

Epidemics occur every 6-10 years and this year is a doozy. Often triggered by floods or droughts, sometimes an outbreak can last up to three years. The most susceptible trees are ones that have been storm damaged, overcrowded or in conditions of too much or not enough water.

People ask, "Why don't we just spray them with insecticide?" Pine beetles fly from one tree to the next and land anywhere along the tree. Few people have sprayers that reach 140 feet in height. And your guess is as good as mine about when they are going to come because they can fly up to 2 miles.

The beetles are usually found above the fall line, so Augusta proper and further south are mostly out of the danger zone. Lincoln, McDuffie, Columbia and McCormick counties are taking a beating.

Unfortunately, once the southern pine beetle has attacked, the tree needs to be removed and destroyed. For large infestations, an outside perimeter cutting of all pines needs to be set up 300 feet from the dying trees to keep the outbreak in check.

If anyone has ever felled a single large pine tree, imagine cutting a 100-yard perimeter in addition to any infested trees to fix a problem. That is a lot of wood. Hopefully, this outbreak will minimize soon, but right now, tree companies are beyond busy.

