



## *C-C-Cold Weather Bass*

*The trick is finding them. Once you do, the action will warm you up in a hurry!*

All right, it's cold outside. You've got your feet up by the fire. You scratch the dog. You flip through tackle catalogs, and you dream of the warm days ahead when you'll be out bass fishing again.

But you could be out there fishing now. There's a good choice of open water around. Even in icebound country, thaws lasting a few days to a week or so open enough water to make it possible to soak a bait or drop a lure. If you don't have to worry about seasons being closed in your area, or if you can fish and release where seasons are closed, don't waste time. There's a lot of cold-weather bass fishing waiting to be enjoyed.

Much of the misery went out of this sport with the advent of snowmobile suits and rods that have sliding grips that close over reel feet and do away with the exposed metal of standard reel seats. If you don't have such gear, you can wrap a metal reel seat with black tape, and pile on layers of clothing until you're as round as a weight lifter. Just make sure your life jacket fits over everything.

Yes, I know how it feels to run down a lake in 35 or 40° weather when tears are whipping from eyes and sticking before they clear the edges. That's what ski masks and goggles are for. But there's nothing to say you have to make that run the way you'd do it in summer. The question is: if you do these things will you catch fish?

I know that bass don't eat much in cold water. But they school a lot tighter, and if you go for the plan I have in mind you'll show your lures to a lot of fish. And some will fall for them.

For this cold-water fishing you'll need some lures that sink like bombs, some that sink very slowly, and some fat plugs of the Big-O type. Use the plugs plain on fair days when the bass rise a little.

Clip a weight ahead of them on miserable days so they'll sink slowly. Lures that must be retrieved rapidly to bring out their action or get them running to the proper depth are far less successful at this time of year.

The quick sinkers, slow sinkers, and fat plugs are the ones to use from about November until the start of the pre-spawn period. Depending on where you live, this can be as early as late January or as far into the season as April.

## How Deep Are They?

In cold weather most bass that can do so go deep. How deep? I knew of one cold-weather tournament that was won by deep jigging in 50 to 80 feet of water in a clear, canyon-type lake. Why? As thermal expert Dr. Charles Coutant put it, "In cold climates, largemouths overwinter in deep water which is then the warmest available." There are exceptions to this, however. For example, in places where power plants discharge warm water in winter, bass rise and move in the vicinity of the outflow.

It is when the bass are up that I prefer to use the fat plugs. As a rule, though, I catch most of my winter bass in 18 to 30 feet of water. If you fish the desert (canyon type) lakes, winter bass down 30 to 40 feet are considered to be in fairly shallow water.

When I began fishing for largemouths in cold water I soon learned that they were not to be caught near some of the long points that produced well for me in warm weather. Some of them were far out from those points. Others I found along the steep drop-offs on the sides of underwater humps. I caught none on the gradually sloping sides of these humps. I learned that bass would move close to a steep cliff shoreline, or one that had stair-step ledges. I also found them along channels of old creeks flooded by an impoundment. If there was standing timber, all the better. These fish wanted to take advantage of the warmer, deeper water and the warm days we got from time to time. In the holding places they had chosen they could rise and sink a short distance to be in favorable conditions. There was no need for them to travel long distances along a bar in toward shore and a feeding shelf.

Often fish will stack up just over the bottom when the water is cold. Or a school may be suspended at any point from surface to bottom.

## Work Lures Vertically

Bass are not in a bait-chasing mood at this time of year, and that's one reason why lures cast and retrieved in the normal fashion are not so effective. If the fish are tight against heavy cover, it is also hard to work lures horizontally past them without getting snagged. The alternative is to fish vertically.

This can be very boring - until you find the fish. Typically you would follow, say, a submerged creekbed and jig along the most promising timber down to the creek's banks. You might work like that all morning and afternoon. And then, just before heading in, you might find the tree. When you find it you could take fish after fish in minutes.

Well-known bass angler Bobby Murray has a theory. He maintains that bass become conditioned by their last big feed when the first freezing spells kill some of the shad they feed on. The shad sink with a fluttering and twitching motion as they die, and the bass school tightly below to pick them off. Vertically jigged lures imitate such dying fish, and the technique deceives the largemouths during this period. A bass doesn't have to chase a vertically jigged lure.

## Best Lures to Use

Not only creek banks but all the other types of holding places I mentioned are prime places to do vertical fishing. The best lures to use include fast sinkers such as the Hopkins-type spoon (the Shorty No. 75 is popular) and leadhead jigs in the 3/8 to 5/8-ounce class trimmed with plastic curly tails or the Wig-Wag Minnow tail. Also good are leadbody, tail-spin lures (the Little George and Pedigo Spin Rite are typical). A small tandemblade spinnerbait can be effective. The tandem spinnerbait offers more water resistance and sinks slower; that is often good.

Bass don't usually sock lures hard this time of year. When I was first learning some of the ways to work a vertical jig I'd snap the lure up, let it settle back, then go through the routine again. I was in a veteran jig man's boat, and soon he said, "Well. Y'missed three so far."

I finally realized what was wrong.

When I reached a high arm position, I quickly lowered my rod, allowing a lot of slack to accumulate in the line. The heavy jig, I thought, would straighten that out before a fish could hit. Not so. My companion had been watching the line, and he saw that it had not straightened out as fast as it should have. That meant the fish had taken the lure briefly and then ejected it.

The problem is that in one of the vertical jigging styles you must let a little slack develop in the line as the lure drops. You just can't have as much slack accumulate as I had been doing. Even when there's a small amount of slack, you must constantly be alert to the slightest hesitation as the line straightens. Sometimes you'll be striking at the slightest hesitation while the line is still slack, but when you come back far and hard enough you'll feel that solidness that means bass.

When I'm vertical jigging in heavy brush, or in treetops, I use tackle stout enough to haul a fish up and out quickly. You'll frequently be dropping your spoons or leadheads right in the middle of the worst tangles where it doesn't take long for a largemouth to wrap your line around obstructions. Unlike the cast and horizontally retrieved lure, a fairly heavy spoon-especially one with a treble hook-worked vertically in the branches can usually be freed easily.

## Slow-Sinking Lures

Another effective method involves the use of slow-sinking lures. These consist of light leadhead jigs with feather, hair, plastic, or pork-rind tails; the small plastic lizards, and straight-shaft spinners. Lures weighing 1/8 to 1/4 of an ounce need light line and tackle if they are to be handled right. This kind of fishing is most suited to rocky ledges, steep cliffs, and similar structures. It is done for bass that are suspended, but not too deeply. The reason it pays off is that though the lures are cast conventionally rather than dropped vertically; they sink slowly, hanging in front of the fish long enough for them to make up their minds to eat without having to exert much energy.

On windy days you can't use ultralight lures and line effectively because the breeze will bow out the line and prevent the lures from sinking. In calmer weather, I work the slow sinkers close up against cliffs or reef walls. I let them settle gently. When a lure has struck a small outcropping, I let it sit for a moment, give it a hop, then pull it off by raising my rod (no reel cranking). I immediately begin to lower my rod again so that the jig or spinner will stay close to the ledge or drop-off. This is important because if you let the lure swing out away from the structure it will also move away from the bass.

The slow sinkers are also effective in finding suspended schools along major ledges. You can place yourself off shore and use the rod-lift method for feeling the lure down, or you can get up tight to the wall or cliff that has good underwater ledges and cast parallel along it. Start with short casts, and then extend them. Finally move your boat up to the limit of your farthest cast and begin throwing the lure again. Always work slowly and be alert for gentle hits.

## What Weather's Best?

There's a lot of disagreement on what kind of cold weather makes for the best fishing. Most anglers agree that bright, clear weather isn't the best for normal largemouth fishing. Yet those mild sunny days seem to bring the fish up. But some winter anglers claim that they have their best luck when a sudden spurt of big snowflakes billowing down onto the water cuts visibility to a nose length.

Now that I've gone all-out on the virtues of vertical jigging with spoons and the slow-settle technique with light sinking lures, some reader may say, "I guess that might work, but I'd rather fish a plastic worm. Or a jig and eel with porkrind; Bet I could work them the same way."

Just between us, if he works at it long enough he'll catch fish that way too.