



Watch the Birds - Catch More Fish

Look up when the fishing's slow. Birds can be eyes in the sky that lead you to fish.

My friend Lou is not an easy man to discourage when it comes to fishing, and neither am I. But once when we were fishing Dale Hollow Reservoir, which straddles the Kentucky Tennessee border, both of us came close to throwing in the towel.

Anyone familiar with Dale Hollow knows it is never easy to fish. Its water is extremely clear, and because of that most of the resident smallmouths and largemouths spend their time in the depths. It takes light spinning tackle, spiderweb lines, and tiny lures to catch them. That's what Lou and I were using. Even so, we were well into our third day and had caught nothing more than a few 10-inch bass.

I suggested that since the squirrel season was open why not head for the dock, unseat our shotguns, and work some of the nearby ridges where the forest floor was littered with hickory and beechnut cuttings. Lou reeled in his plug, started the outboard motor, and pushed the throttle lever forward.

We were skimming across the glassy surface in the direction of Star Point Camp when a pair of belted kingfishers appeared high overhead. I watched their effortless movements for a few seconds, but I wasn't much interested in them.

Then something happened that made me completely forget about squirrel hunting. It was also something which over the years since has had a profound effect on my angling strategy.

The kingfishers, which by this time were 100 yards or so away, suddenly dived straight for the surface, skimmed it briefly, and instantly were airborne again, each with a threadfin shad clenched tightly in its auburn-colored beak. That's when Lou swung the wheel hard. Seconds later he stopped the motor, reached for his spinning tackle, and tossed a small gray plug almost exactly on top of the receding ripples where the birds had touched down. Lou let the lure sink a few feet, made two turns of the reel handle, and almost had his rod taken away from him by a gutsy smallmouth.

"Grab a rod!" he yelled as his light stick doubled over. Seconds later other birds that I couldn't identify appeared from nowhere and began skimming the surface.

For unforgettable minutes both of our rods danced under the pressure of rambunctious bass. During that brief time we boated and released nine smallmouths averaging about 2 1/2 pounds each. Then the action stopped.

It was early fall, and the bass apparently had abandoned their usual haunts along steep shoreline structures and were schooling over mid-lake bars. We figured that whenever a surface-swimming school of baitfish ventured near, the bass rose from the depths and slashed into them. Then the birds arrived to pick up floating bits and pieces of mauled shad.

Once we had doped this out, we knew what to do. Each time we spotted birds diving to the water we'd rush to the area as fast as we could. Usually we'd get in half a dozen casts before the bass retreated to the depths. Then it was only a matter of waiting until other bass rose to chase other baitfish. The location of the school was signaled to us each time by enterprising scavengers on the wing.

Truthfully, neither Lou nor I can boast much about our angling ability during that Tennessee adventure. It was the belted kingfishers, as well as other bird species we saw, that must be credited with our success. They showed us where the bass were. In the years since then I have made a special effort to watch for birds when I'm fishing.

According to "The Audubon Illustrated Handbook of American Birds," there are more than 800 species, of birds in the U.S. Many of these birds commonly live and loaf near water where they feed predominantly on baitfish, insects, and aquatic life. The species that is most likely to help anglers include gulls, terns, kingfishers, redwing blackbirds, grebes, herons, egrets, and ospreys.

There are numerous pocket-size guidebooks available that can be useful in identifying these species and understanding their behavior. I recommend, "A Guide to Field Identification of Birds of North America," published by the Golden Press, because the illustrations are in color and the book can easily be slipped into a tackle-box for ready reference.

Undoubtedly the most popular type of bird-watching done by anglers is looking for gulls, common terns, or sooty terns on larger reservoirs when fishing for white bass, striped bass, or

any of the black bass species. In fact, an increasing number of anglers each year fish this way. The practice is known in some areas as jump-fishing.

To do it, an angler positions his boat near mid-lake bars, reefs, or perhaps over river channels running along the bottom of a reservoir. These structures are easily located on contour maps, by random searching with depth-finders, or by scouting for a concentration of boats in which anglers are playing the same game. These mid-lake structures are where large schools of gizzard shad, threadfin shad, herring, and various other baitfish commonly hang out.

Then the anglers begin searching the sky for signs of birds beginning to group. They especially keep a lookout for large flocks of birds diving to the surface. This is a sure indication that gamefish have risen from the depths to slash into the baitfish.

I also recommend keeping an eye out for lone birds flying high. When white bass, stripers, or members of the *Micropterus* clan begin slashing into forage, sentry gulls have a way of communicating the event to others of their kind from great distances. Traveling birds, therefore, may lead you to where the action is. At Santee-Cooper in South Carolina I have seen stripers, for example, rush to the surface to chase schools of blueback herring at times when only a couple of birds were in the air. But when the feeding frenzy really began it seemed like large numbers of gulls suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

When birds start diving to pick up dead or crippled baitfish, anglers get to the areas as fast as they can since these surface-feeding sprees usually don't last long. It's necessary to get there quickly, skirt the action, and make as many casts as possible before the fish go down. Anglers generally use lures closely resembling the baitfish the gamefish are feeding on. If a line breaks or a reel malfunctions, they set that particular rig aside and grab another.

Binoculars play an important role in jump-fishing. Mid-lake structures frequented by baitfish may be widely scattered, so it's not unusual for fishermen on larger waters to watch for birds as far as several miles away.

Spotting gulls at larger reservoirs is only one of many ways anglers tuned in to the habits of birds can find fast fishing. Last spring, for example, I was fishing Table Rock Lake in Missouri. I was working from a johnboat and was out for largemouth bass. Redwing blackbirds showed me where they were.

Along the bank of one embayment, where there were thick clutches of cattails and bullrushes, I saw some redwings perched on stalks at the water's edge. Occasionally they'd leave their perches and flit about just above the water's surface.

I knew that redwings feed primarily on mosquitoes, gnats, and similar winged insects. I also knew that they almost always go for insects that are flying rather than those that are stationary.

Since there was no wind that day, the thing that puzzled me was what was causing the insects to become airborne once in a while.

I flipped the switch on my electric motor, eased in close for a look, and got the answer. The water was shallow and clear. Using polarized glasses, I saw four bass cruising the edge of the shoreline. I estimated them to be about three-pounders, and guessed that they were on the prowl for small bluegills, minnows, or maybe crayfish or frogs. As they bullied about, brushing against the cattails and weed stems, small clouds of insect rose into the air. When this happened, the redwings left their perches and fed on the flying insects.

From then on, the bass fishing that day was almost too easy. I checked the shorelines of every small cove in that area of the lake. Everywhere I found redwings on the feed; a few casts directly beneath them produced strikes.

The presence of redwings along banks, particularly where there are weedbeds and similar cover, can also be a good indication that there are panfish nearby. Almost any species of insect-eating birds that seem to be gathering along shorelines are worth watching.

One farm pond I fish regularly holds some of the largest redbreast sunfish I have found anywhere. But since the water is extremely shallow, the fish never seem to stay in one place for long. For many years, finding the fish usually required fishing the entire pond experimentally. This took a lot of time.

Last summer, however, I hit upon a shortcut. There are always cedar waxwings hanging around the pond, but I hadn't paid much heed to them. It was purely by accident that I happened to be fly-rod-ding when half a dozen of the birds flushed almost at my feet near a thick stand of reeds. I caught some redbreasts right there. I moved down the shoreline, flushed more waxwings, and again caught sunfish. Now, whenever I visit the pond, I first sit on a nearby knoll and carefully glass the shoreline cover with binoculars, memorizing those places where cedar waxwings are feeding. After that, it's usually only a few minutes before I have a deep bend in my rod.

During the summer I also spend some time fishing that stretch of the Ohio River that serves as the northern border of Kentucky.

Bass are the primary target of most anglers, but I also enjoy good panfishing. I've fished almost everywhere on the river, but there are specific places where I find large bluegills. I've found few of these hot spots on my own, but many have been revealed to me by pigeons.

Many highway bridges and railroad trestles span the water. Nearly all of them have resident pigeon populations. The birds roost on metal struts and I-beams underneath the bridges and trestles.

Each bridge or trestle may be several hundred yards long, but there are 10 to 20-yard sections where the birds roost. The blue gills are always directly below the roosting sites, and the reason is easy to understand.

The birds' droppings fall into the water, creating a rich supply of organic nutrients. These nutrients foster a very prolific food chain (both plant and animal) that attracts baitfish and panfish.

Such locations are good to try for larger gamefish that may be lurking around. Near one railroad trestle I boated a large string of bluegills one afternoon. I was using popping bugs. Since I didn't care to clean more panfish that day, I switched to heavy baitcasting tackle and began casting diving plugs along the concrete foundations of each trestle support.

On the second cast I hooked into an 11-pound muskie. An hour later I hung another that I estimated to be about 15 pounds. The fish swam around a support column, however, and rubbed my line against the cement until it broke.

Another place where this highway-bridge fishing pays off is Kentucky Lake in the Land-Between-The-Lakes area of western Kentucky. Nesting swallows make cone-shaped mud houses on the understructure of bridges spanning the many small tributaries that feed the lake. Beneath these mud houses are concentrations of minnows, and-often as not-hundreds of crappies that have been drawn to feed on them.

Lakes and reservoirs in hilly or mountainous regions frequently have shorelines of sheer rock walls. Nooks and crannies in these walls are often the homes of many different bird species, so I never pass these areas without making a few casts. On many occasions I've caught smallmouths or spotted bass.

In the swampland reservoirs of the Southeast, herons and egrets standing long-legged in weedy coves, or ospreys circling overhead, are often a tipoff that largemouths are nearby. These birds consume large quantities of baitfish such as shiners, various rough fish, and even panfish and small gamefish. The same types of forage are highly rated menu items for bass.

In the West, coho and kokanee salmon as well as various trouts can be found by watching gull activity over large reservoirs. An inconspicuous Western grebe, paddling about and periodically diving beneath the surface, can also lead the way to these fish.

All of this should not be taken to mean that birds should dominate an angler's attention. There are many ways to find fish, and the most consistently successful anglers are those who are able to locate cover or bottom conditions that various species prefer. Successful fishermen also realize the importance of presenting lures or baits correctly.

But no matter what fish you're after, or where you may be fishing, keep an eye out for birds. If the action has been slow, birds may give you a clue where you can load up your stringer.