



How to Fish a Weed Bed

By: Ramon J. Ross

THE MOON got an edge over the world. At first I could see only the glow of Abner's pipe when he sucked the stem. Then the rim grew larger and made the water look like a mass of deep-silver snow. The hills began to swell around Dale Hollow, taking form behind the lights twinkling on the Kentucky shore.

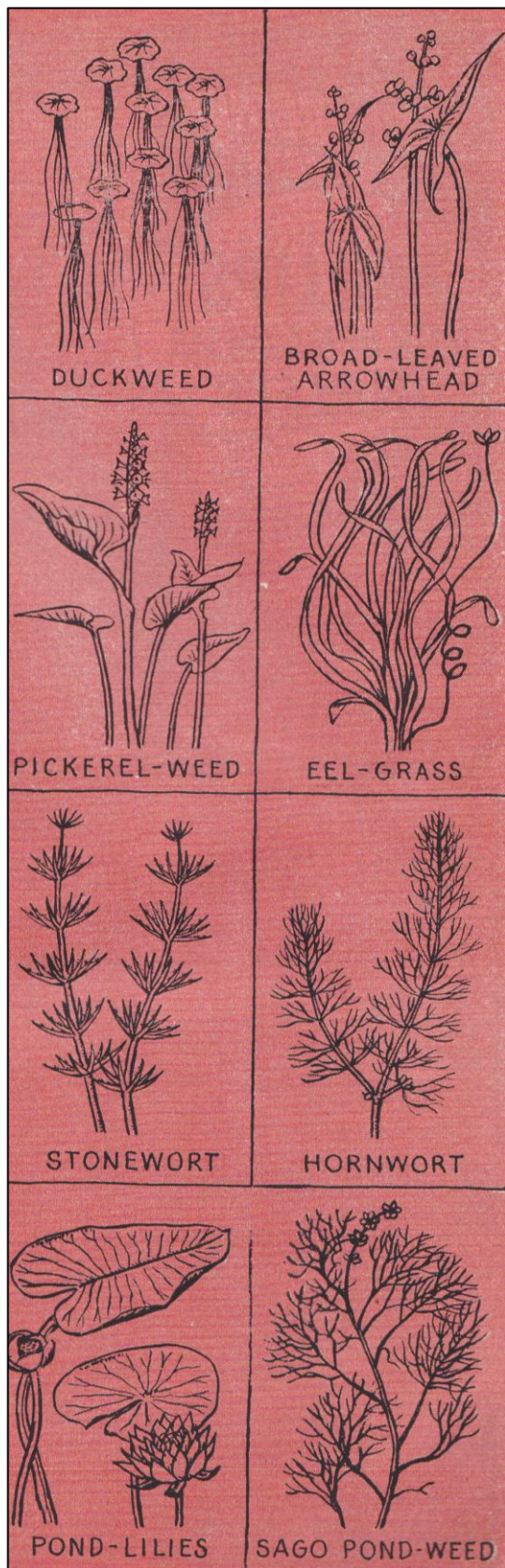
Over the purr of his Meek the old master allowed as how we could fish for another half hour, but that if nothing happened we would quit. Forty minutes later Brother Abner checked a luminous dial and we upped anchor. I heaved the stringer on board. It was a struggle to lift it; we had four smallmouths and five walleyes the nine fish weighed fifty-three pounds.

We didn't need the camp lights to guide us back now, but Abner automatically took his fix when the motor kicked over. I said goodbye to a weed bed I had never seen.

There are many things about angling that are inexplicable by any reasonable standard. Many old time fishermen say, for instance, that when a heavy mist is on the river fishing will not be good. Over the years this has proved to be true; why it should be so is absolutely unclear to me. The only connection between mist and fishing is the following weather. When the sun rises or sets in mist the air will be clear and bright, always a tough time to take fish.

I don't believe that anybody can predict when fish will feed. About all we can do is use common sense and work the way conditions dictate. Now and then, in traveling around the country, I meet an angler like Abner, who has positive opinions about his fishing and backs them up with results. I think the most unusual aspect of the Abner's method of weed bed fishing is his meticulous approach. Abner studies aquatic plants seriously and uses them as a guide in locating fish.

Abner is a Georgia boy, but he makes the TVA and Army Engineers circuit every season and no matter where he goes-Dale Hollow, Wheeler, Center Hill or Guntersville-he regularly visits certain gravel bars and weed beds in each place. Abner can find some of his hotspots in pitch dark. That's important to him, because he believes the fish quit feeding when the moon is up.



He casts over submerged beds with a surface plug, working it noisy but slow. For lily beds he uses the traditional silver wobbling spoon and pork rind, making the bait fall next to a pad, climb up on the pad, fall off again and swim on to the next one.

There's nothing new in his technique except that he knows which weed patches are holding game fish. Given a choice of twenty different beds, he will unerringly go to three or four where a person can get some action.

A weed bed is more complicated than it looks. Take duckweed, for instance. This pretty little green plant floats on the surface of many lakes throughout North America, and anybody who tangles with the stuff is fairly certain of not catching fish. For one thing, it isn't rooted, and no weedless lure can pass through a patch without raking loose gobs of it.

More to the point, duckweed completely shuts out light from the water, causing submerged plants to die and the herbivorous insects and crustaceans to migrate. Mallards slurp the leafy greens like pigs do turnips, but fish avoid duckweed like the plague.

Yet on an ordinary lake, a person is about as helpless as a frog in a bucket unless he's prepared to cast into weed beds. Some fish-the lake trout is one-won't wander back in the botanical traps that sprout from the bottom, but nearly all other species invade areas of vegetation when they get hungry.

According to Abner, bass who feed in open water are just wiping up bean juice with their corn bread. They forage like pike and muskellunge-where the long stems of hornwort bend under colonies of mollusks, aquatic insects, annelids and other organisms that attract small fish. Yellow perch, sunfish, the crappies and, in cold-water lakes, even trout graze in grass. **Go you and do likewise.**

Abner separates his weed beds into two types. The short-branched ones like eelgrass are for early-morning and evening casting. Eelgrass grows in relatively shallow water and its leaves are about a yard long. Only small

bass, watching the sunlit pockets for minnows, hide among it. Sago pondweed, hornwort and common waterweed grow in slightly deeper water, and their branches (up to eight or ten feet long in some lakes) create large areas of shadow which camouflage heavy game fish during bright daylight hours.

When Abner approaches a submerged weed bed he keeps his boat between the sun and the spot he intends to fish. In this way he can work the shadowy areas with his lures while the boat remains out of sight. If approached from the opposite direction the angler is sitting over his quarry and working the bait on what Mr. Abner calls the blind side. These observations coincide, incidentally, with what I have seen underwater in both northern and southern lakes.

I asked Abner what he thought of the stoneworts, and he said they held bass only in the summer months. Again, that has been my impression, as stoneworts attract great numbers of crayfish during that period, possibly because of the lime deposits on their branches. The lime is an otherwise discouraging barrier to herbivorous insects. While smallmouths are happy as clams chasing crayfish over the *Nitella* and *Cham*, our friend the bigmouth is wandering among the emergent plants looking for the fat bugs of summer.

No bass fisherman needs to be told how important to game fish emergent water lilies are. Although their pads cover shallow areas densely, they encourage insect growth rather than hinder it. The undersides of lily pads hold snails, beetle eggs, water mites, caddis larvae and many other foods that feed minnows.

Pickerelweed is another fish factory, and I always look for it when I'm bugging during the hot days of July and August. This is also an emergent plant, with broad arrow-shaped leaves and bluish-colored flowers. During the summer months when dragonflies and damsel flies are hatching, it's the pickerelweed beds that draw largemouth bass.

The nymphs climb up the stems and shuck their skins before taking wing. The closely related arrowhead plant, which often grows among pickerelweed (but has white flowers), holds the adult insects, as well as snails and, consequently, small fish. Abner pointed out, however, that there are plants which grow along the shoreline, such as the sundews, mare's-tail, star grass, and smartweed, which have a more important story to tell during the fall and winter months.

Wherever a spring is spilling into the lake most of the plants will stay green long after the rest of the bank vegetation has dried up. "You can't call it weed-bed fishing," Abner said, "but it amounts to the same thing. I have a dozen good spots around the Hollow that I found last fall, where spring seepage sometimes makes the water warmer than the rest of the lake during real cold spells. They're easy to locate because these are the only green plants you'll see at this time of year."

I doubt if spring seepage is the sole reason game fish concentrate in a small area during cold weather. The seepage probably attracts minnows and that triggers off a whole chain of big fish eating little fish. Late one season on Michigan's Thornapple River I caught an outsized pike at the mouth of a rivulet which showed bright green against the dead foliage.

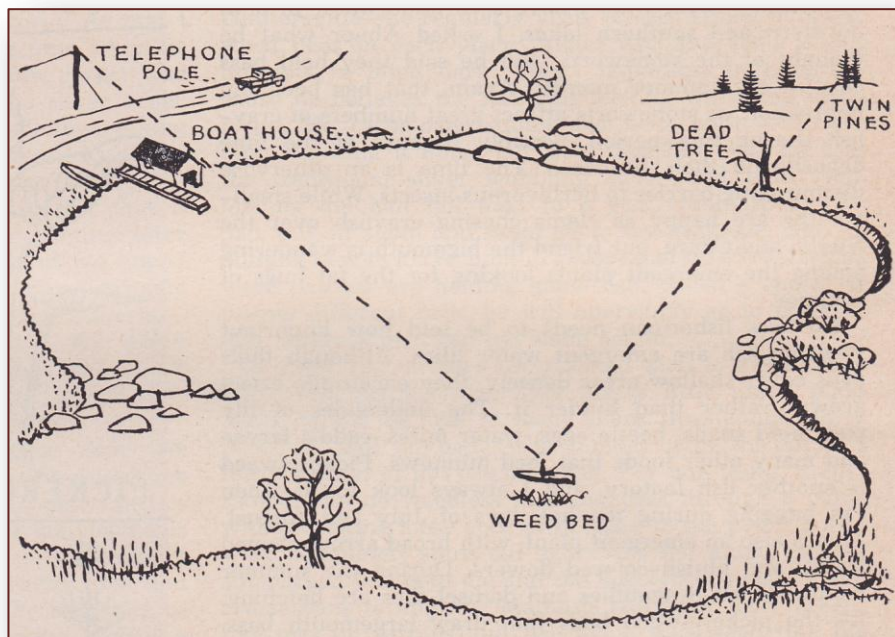
I had not touched a single fish all day, and as we floated past some brush sweepers leaning in the current, my spoon became wind-borne and landed where I had no intention of casting-smack in the grass. I teased it loose and the big pike took my spoon, jumped once, then twisted and rolled, his milk-white belly flashing in the last of the November light. It was a strong play while it lasted. I hesitated getting a

bowling-ball grip on his eye sockets, but he held motionless for a moment and I flopped him aboard at last.

He weighed 22 pounds, and when we cut him open there were four small bass inside, all of them freshly swallowed. We didn't catch another fish that day, although I think we might have if we had worked the green spots instead of the brush piles used by summer fish.

A guide who takes parties out every day on the same lake gets his productive beds well located. When fishing hits a slump he visits the best ones and always manages to find some sport for his customers. This isn't a matter of luck. I know many guides in both the North and South who spend days leaning over a glass-bottomed bucket, dragging lines to locate weed beds. Some of the so-called gravel bars and dropoffs favored by smallmouth bass addicts are nothing more than open spaces between hornwort forests.

Recently I fished with a guide who had fixed a weed bed used by landlocked salmon, a species we don't



normally associate with pasture life. On one miserable rain-swept day we caught seven salmon along the edge of it; no amount of casting elsewhere provided a strike. The water was so turbid from a week of northeast blows that we couldn't actually see the bed, but my guide had an accurate fix on its position.

Relocating a weed bed is easy. All you need is a pair of

markers on the shore, such as buildings, telephone-poles; oddly shaped trees or even objects in the lake itself (stumps and boulders, for instance), provided they are far enough away. Don't use objects on opposite sides of the lake; you won't be able to tell whether you are between them or not.

Say you are anchored over your hotspot and looking back at the shore. You see a boathouse which is visually backed by a telephone pole. This is a fix, but you need another fix to intersect it, and that should be as close to ninety degrees around the horizon as possible. Off to the right is a globe-shaped tree, and behind this a pair of hemlocks that grow side by side. An imaginary line from the phone pole to the boathouse and another from the hemlocks and globe-shaped tree will fix your position precisely.

Getting an accurate fix in fiat country like Florida is somewhat more difficult, but as a rule you can find enough points of reference to arrive at the general location. I don't travel in the back country of Florida without a map and compass even though I have an excellent sense of direction. Palm trees and hummocks have a way of looking alike no matter how much time you spend around -them.

Abner has a lot of theories about fishing. Some of them I don't go along with. But I do recommend his systematic approach to weed beds. Much of what we can't explain about the feeding habits of lake fish is hidden in the underwater jungle.

