

## Deep Bassin'

Only a fool thinks that they understand bass so well that they can catch them with ease. By the time I was sixteen I had become a serious fool. I was sure I knew where and how to catch bass. All one needed to do back in 1969 to catch bass was make an accurate roll cast with a plastic texas-rigged worm, jig, spinnerbait, or even one of the new alphabet plugs. Of course, to entice a strike the lure had to land close to where a tree had blown down into the water and a big ole' pig was surely lurking and ready to stretch your line.

Bass fishing was simple back then. Water depth was measured by poking your five and one half foot pistol grip baitcaster tip first into the depths. If you hit bottom you were in the zone where bass lived. Anything deeper was considered a waste of time.

Bass fishing was a "season", just like hunting. In Delaware bass fishing was what you did from May until October, before the blue-winged teal arrived on the scene. There was no point in fishing past then, because everyone knew back then that bass hibernated in the winter and couldn't be caught.

One day my neighborhood friends cancelled our plans to play ice hockey on nearby Beck's pond, which was frozen solid. With nothing else to do, I decided to try my luck at ice-fishing for crappie and bluegills like I had read about in *Field & Stream*. I jigged a tiny Tony Acetta Pet Spoon up and down like a YoYo, and was shocked when something under the ice tried to pull my rod into the hole. Flopping on the ice seconds later was a 3-pound largemouth as white as snow. My world of bass fishing knowledge was suddenly rocked!

Even though I didn't catch another bass through the ice, I could not forget that solitary incident on Beck's Pond, nor could I dismiss it as a fluke. I realized then that I didn't know how much I didn't know, which set me on the path that I still follow today in search for more effective ways to catch bass whenever they are deep.

This journey started in the Northeast part of the country, and worked its way down the east coast, and then up the west coast, with many cross-country trips in-between. Over the next 35 years of bass fishing I learned far more about deep bass fishing than I can describe in this article, but I will share some of what I "think" I have learned along the way.

It became readily apparent that although "a bass is a bass is a bass", they do behave differently according to the climate and environment in which they inhabit. There are many theories to explain why bass act the way that they do in the winter, and I can neither prove nor disprove any of these. But if I were a betting man, I would lay my money on the availability or lack of *forage* as the primary reason that dictates winter bass behavior.

My second bet would cover the option that water temperature also has a pronounced effect on bass behavior. This is a sucker bet for sure, because it doesn't take a biologist to know that as a cold-blooded animal, activity levels and metabolism of bass decline as water temperatures drop below 50 degrees, and once the 40-degree mark is approached, a state of suspended activity can occur which allows a bass to survive long periods without additional nutritional ingestion. In this condition bass can be tougher to catch than post-spawn suspended bass.

In the late 1970's I moved to Southern California, and began an entire new era of trying to learn how to catch largemouth bass again. Suddenly 99% of the water was too deep to touch bottom with my pistol grip rods, and I knew that I needed to do more than get longer Lamiglas rods! Casting accuracy still helped, but had little overall effect on my success level compared to learning finesse techniques, and especially learning to fish in deep water.

Lucky for me I met a couple of deep water experts named Bob Taylor and Don Iovino (the Godfather of doodling). Every month the San Fernando Valley Bassmasters had a tournament, and while everyone else was pounding the banks, Bob Taylor was cleaning our clocks by fishing out the deep side of his boat. Bob looked like he was always "stranded" in the center of a flat or cove, and more than once other boaters went to him to see if he needed a tow.

The only help Bob ever needed was with bringing his big sack of bass to the scales, and he cleaned our clocks in many tournaments. After a while guys would realize that there were more bass behind their boats than next to the shore, and they would fish deep like Bob. Unfortunately they rarely caught fish and soon gave up on the tactic, and some even made reckless accusations that Bob couldn't possibly be catching the bass that he weighed. They were wrong.

Don Iovino proved to every tournament bass fisherman on the west coast and on the national level that bass could be caught deep, and they were often better quality bass.

Like a sponge I absorbed every bit of information that Bob and Don were willing to divulge about catching bass in water as deep as 50 feet, and I analyzed that information over and over until I learned how to apply what I had learned.

Within a couple of years I was catching largemouth and smallmouth bass regularly at 65 feet. Spotted bass are taken much deeper on lakes like Shasta and Oroville, and I have heard of some being taken deeper than 100 feet!

Of course not all bass go deep; even on the same body of water. This is probably nature's way of ensuring survival of the species, and a balance of predator and prey relationships. And I'll also hazard the statement that not all bodies of water are suitable for bass to go deep.

As mentioned earlier, my bet on the primary reason bass go deep is to find food. In Southern California the deep bass were clearly gorging themselves on shad. Many times a jigging spoon would snag the shad which were in thick balls in deep water. Bass would regurgitate the shad as you reeled them to the surface, and your deck and livewell would become filthy with shad remains.

In northern California lakes the spotted bass in the depths follow and feed on pond smelt, as well as shad and many other species. In Washington State the smallmouth bass feed in water at least as deep as 65 feet on smelt, sculpin, yellow perch, and even crayfish that haven't crawled under a rock for the winter. Whether you fish the Great Lakes or the Arizona desert lakes, there are deep bass and they aren't going hungry.

The timing of bass going from shallow to deeper water in pursuit of food on lakes that stratify in the summer seems to occur shortly after turnover. With the Fall turnover the water is mixed thoroughly from the surface to the bottom. Before there was little to no dissolved oxygen in the depths, and after turnover the depths contain both oxygen and nutrients that baitfish seek, and bass follow.

Bass seem to stay in deep water as long as food is available there. If anything drives them to the shallows in the spring it could likely be the urge to seek spawning habitat and the warming rays of brighter sunlight.

While bass occupy deep water, there are certain types of habitat that they seem to prefer. Knowledge of these spots will focus your fishing attention to areas where you will likely have more success. Since there are usually many acres of deep water, and since bass are more difficult to catch in deep water, recognizing terrain that concentrates bass and fishing those spots will greatly increase your luck and enjoyment.

Creek channels that drain arms or coves of reservoirs and lakes are the first type of deep structure that I try to fish after turnover. These seem to be used as roadmaps for pelagic schools of baitfish, and the bass are sure to follow. The next type of deep structure worth exploring is steep walls that drop off into deep water. Here bass don't have to move far to go deep, and the wall serves to channel baitfish in a manner that makes them easy to ambush.

Once winter really sets in, my favorite structure becomes underwater humps or islands. Usually these have hard bottoms at their shallowest point since current from wind and wave action keeps the silt dusted off their tops. Bass love these spots to ambush baitfish that swim past. Never overlook an underwater saddle, which is basically two underwater humps with a depression in-between. Some days the bass will be found on top of the humps, and other days they will be on the sides where the bottom drops into the saddle.

Structure is made more attractive to bass if it also contains "cover". Although deep water in a sense is cover in itself (from overhead predators like birds), the types of cover that attract congregations of bass in deep water are sunken bridges, wrecks, fallen or standing timber, sewer pipes, tire reefs, brush piles, or any other sunken trash. Bass use these

features as a home territory, and they exploit the structure to improve their foraging success. Simply put bass utilize the cover to feed, and these are the bass that are “catchable”.

So if you find deep structure that contains cover, and bait is present, you would expect to catch deep bass, right? Then why doesn't it seem to work that way? Probably the biggest reason that catching bass in deep water is tough is that many anglers don't have a clue when they are getting bites. When a bass sips in your four-inch plastic worm in 50 feet of water, it will probably spit it back out without you ever having a clue that your lure had just been bit!

Feeling the bite is the biggest challenge to overcome if you are to be successful in catching bass deep.

Bob taught me that the best chance I would have to feel a deep bite is to vertically drop my lure straight down to the target zone. Lure control means everything! If the lure is dropping to the underwater hump, and my Ranger boat moves its position, my fishing line would no longer be a straight line between my rod tip and my lure. The deflection of my line over the course of 50 feet of depth would be significant enough that if a bass sucked in my worm or jig, the three to five inches of movement would never be detectable with my rod.

Another trick that I learned when vertically fishing was to “weigh” my lure every once in a while. In other words after shaking the worm in place (doodling) for a few seconds I would then pause, and lift the rod tip about one foot to feel for tension. If a bass is holding your worm and sitting still near the bottom, when you lift the rod the line tension will load your rod tip. Set the Hook! Most all bites in deep water feel no different than if you snagged a wet towel, or were stretching a rubber band with your rod tip.

If you lift and don't feel pressure, then slowly lower your rod tip until you feel the line go limp, which indicates you are still maintaining just enough contact with the bottom to keep your line straight. If you were to have too much line out, then your lure will drag bottom, and your line will have a bow in it that robs your ability to feel a fish take your lure.

Your choice of a sensitive fishing rod is more critical when fishing deep than at any other time of the year. A high modulus graphite rod that has a fast taper like a Lamiglas 663 will signal a bite, and allow you to feel your lure contact the bottom, much better than a slow action or low quality graphite rod. I actually prefer a 6 foot or six and one half foot rod in deep situations for vertical fishing compared to a seven foot rod, as I feel it gives me better sensitivity with the tip closer to my hands.

Your fishing line can also improve your ability to feel bites, if you use a low stretch line like Sugoi Fluorocarbon, or McCoy Copolymer line. Both of these have a thin diameter, which also improves your ability to keep your line straight since thin line has less water resistance than thick line.

Of all your equipment, probably the reel is the least important tool with regards to feeling the bite, however a thumb bar on a baitcaster makes lure control much easier as the bottom depth constantly changes, and a fast retrieve is appreciated when you notice your line is no longer straight, and the only fix is to retrieve your lure from deep water and drop it straight back down to the bottom once again. I prefer the smooth action of my Shimano Calais reels since they allow me to quickly freespool a three-sixteenths ounce Texas-rigged worm on 8-pound McCoy to the bottom in 50 feet of water. When dropshotting I prefer a Stradic 2500 size spinning reel and 6-pound test line.

Another important aspect to catching deep bass is your ability to concentrate on your lure action. The mental ability to envision your lure as you vibrate it on the bottom in deep water will make it much easier for you to detect when a bass slowly moves up to your lure and sucks it in. Most times you don't feel the bite like you would a "tap-tap" in the summer, but instead the lure simply feels different. By concentrating on your rod tip rhythm, you will instinctively find yourself setting the hook with no conscience realization that a bite had just occurred! This also requires a degree of optimism, which is one tool you should always bring with you whenever you go fishing.

The reason the bite feels like a rubber band is a combination of the depth, the deflection in your line, and that bass don't often move far once they grab your bait in deep water. One way that beginners can better feel bites when first learning to fish deep is to use a heavy lure that will keep slack out of your line, and then drift with a slight breeze and allow your football head grub or Carolina-Rig drag over the bottom. Let out just enough line to maintain bottom contact. Now when a bass clamps down on the grub, your boat drift takes out the slack and your rod tip loads up and you feel the rubber band bite and know to set the hook. If you have more than a slight breeze, you can slow your drift by employing a drift sock over the side of your boat.

While drifting is effective, many anglers prefer a much more active method of fishing deep. If you are in a region where the bass are feeding on schools of dying baitfish like shad, it is tough to beat a jigging spoon. For years the standard spoon was a three-quarters ounce Hopkins, but there are many quality spoons now on the market. A stiff rod and 12 to 15 pound test line are preferred. One of the great things about spooning is that you don't need to detect the bite to catch bass (although it helps). Just the act of vertically jigging the spoon up and down a couple of feet above the bottom will quickly signal when a bass has grabbed your offering. When you snatch-up your rod tip, and it stays down, the bass is already hooked! Of course, as you get experienced in spooning you will find that most bites will actually occur as the spoon is dropping, and if you pay attention and maintain lure control by lowering your rod tip at the same speed as the sink rate of the spoon, then you will actually feel a bass grab your sinking spoon, and you can set the hook and increase your success rate.

Again, a straight line from your rod tip to the lure is the key to feeling bites!

Although the previous tips offered involve some kind of lure action, many deep bass prefer a lure that is *gliding* along the bottom as opposed to *hopping*. In colder regions where shad don't exist, and where everything in the deep, cold water is in a state of slow motion, a lure with too much action looks out of place to a bass, and is often refused. This is the case in the northern climates. Deadsticking a dropshot bait or grub is usually a better choice than shaking it.

Another tool that is critical to deep water bass fishing is a quality Sonar and GPS unit. My preference is for the new color combination unit offered by Lowrance like the LMS 332c, as it really shows deep bass holding tight to the bottom in 60 feet of water that other units simply miss. I can also manually adjust the sensitivity to show my lure drop all the way to the bottom, which is easily tracked on the screen. Once a bass grabs the lure, a quick punch of a button and I have saved the location on the GPS unit, and even if I get blown off the spot by the wind I can always find it again without relying on landmarks that are hard to use out in the middle of a lake.

A quality sonar unit makes it easy to find both structure and cover, as well as baitfish and bass in deep water. Keep a couple of marker buoys nearby (with 100 feet of string and 4 ounces of lead), and when you find a promising underwater feature toss the buoy out to help you mark the position while you give it a try. A marker buoy helps you notice when your boat begins to drift, which again puts deflection in your line and causes you to miss bites.

Another important tool to bring when fishing deep for bass is a hypodermic needle, like the kind you get from a feed supply store or your veterinarian. When a bass is caught from deep water, try to return the bass as quickly as possible to the water if you don't intend to keep it. In most cases this bass will be able to immediately return to the depths with no problem.

When a bass is on the bottom in deep water, its swim bladder is compressed so that the bass achieves negative buoyancy. The change in pressure that occurs when a bass is brought to the surface causes the swim bladder gasses to expand like a balloon, and once expansion occurs the bass will be unable to overcome the buoyancy and swim back to the bottom. Bass kept in a livewell in this condition will be swimming with their belly to the sky, and will die if the gasses are not exhausted or compressed. This is where the needle comes in, and using the needle is a process commonly known as "fizzing" a bass.

The procedure is fairly simple. Lay a bass on its side, and draw an imaginary line between its anal vent, and the notch in the dorsal (top) fin. Now put your finger on the spot where this imaginary line intersects the lateral line down the side of the bass. Count down four to five rows of scales down this imaginary line, and this will be the best insertion point for the needle. Gently lift up this scale, and push the needle into the flesh about one inch at a forty-five degree angle towards its head. When the needle tip penetrates the swim bladder you will hear the gas escape through the needle. Gently press against the side in the belly region to force all the gas out of the swim bladder.

If you perform this process in your livewell under water, you will see the gas bubbles escape toward the surface of the water in your livewell. When all the gas is expelled, remove the needle and release the bass and observe that it swims to the bottom.

Bass that have been properly fizzed will quickly heal and recover to normal activity within 24 hours. I know it works, as I have caught the same tagged bass (#236) three times from the same spot in 45 feet of water, after having fizzed that bass twice. Some people are reluctant to learn how to fizz a bass, but if you plan to fish in deep water and don't want to kill your catch, then you need to learn or else stick to hunting in the winter.

After 3 seasons of slaying bass on Lucky Craft jerkbaits and cranks, many anglers hang up their gear for the winter. Don't be one of those guys or gals. Just follow the bait and the bass, use the proper gear and techniques, and most importantly keep your line straight, and you can continue to enjoy bass fishing year-round. Ciao. You can reach me at [LimitBy9@aol.com](mailto:LimitBy9@aol.com).