

Fizzing

The proper handling of bass is important as a conservation measure. As anglers it is important to be informed how take care of our resource. Most know that in the summer it is important to provide well-aerated, cool water, but don't realize how to care for bass caught during the winter.

The potential problem an angler needs to know how to deal with is the problem of an inflated swim bladder, which is a condition that occurs when a bass is brought to the surface from deep water. Bass have an organ commonly referred to as a "swim bladder", which allows the bass to adjust its buoyancy to maintain a specific depth. When the bass is located in deep water on the bottom, which is particularly common in the winter months, the swim bladder is deflated, with very little gas inside as buoyancy is not needed. A problem arises when that same fish is caught by an angler, and brought to the surface where atmospheric pressure is less. The decrease in pressure may cause the swim bladder to inflate as the gas expands. Once inflated, the bass cannot expel the gas to allow it to return to the depths.

Usually a bass that is quickly released will be able to return to the depths before the swim bladder has time to expand. This is always the best course of action. If you are fishing in a tournament and have to put this bass in a Livewell, or if you delay its release to take pictures or because you have difficulty in removing the hook, you should be prepared to help the bass by knowing how to properly deflate the swim bladder.

Deflating the swim bladder can be safely accomplished utilizing a needle that is inserted through the side of the bass, directly into the swim bladder, so the gas can escape out the needle. The small puncture wound made by the needle will typically seal almost immediately, and heals quickly. Studies have shown that many bass have returned to normal levels of activity within 24 hours after having their swim bladder properly deflated. Even bass that have had larger tears in their swim bladder (the size of your little fingernail) have been able to heal and survive.

There are also non-invasive means of deflating the swim bladder, such as using a weighted, inverted milk crate to lower the bass to the bottom and use water pressure to compress the gas in the swim bladder. Unfortunately few of us are willing to carry a milk crate and rope in our boats for the occasional bass that may need this procedure.

There will always be increased delayed mortality associated with catching deep bass and allowing their swim bladder to inflate, so anglers should be sensitive to this situation. You can recognize when a bass is in trouble by observing it after you release it, or while it is in your Livewell. Once the swim bladder has expanded, the bass will be swimming the backstroke. The balloon like swim bladder will cause the bass to bob on the surface like a cork. One thing is certain; a bass in this condition returned to the water without deflating the swim bladder will die.

Many bass fishermen refer to the process of using a needle to deflate the swim bladder as "fizzing" a bass. Once the needle is properly inserted into the swim bladder, by submerging the bass under water and applying pressure on the swim bladder the gas is allowed to escape through the needle and bubbles will rise to the surface, hence the name "fizzing". This method keeps the gills and other delicate tissues wet, and provides visual

feedback to let you know when the gas is expelled. Once the flow of bubbles terminates, simply remove the needle and return the bass to the water.

If you fizz a bass and return it to your Livewell, be sure to observe this fish periodically as their swim bladder will often continue to expand. When this occurs you will need to fizz the bass once again.

Most tackle shops sell needles suitable for fizzing, and you can also obtain them from a feed store where they are sold for veterinary use. Any small gauge will be suitable, and it is best to buy one with a protective cover to avoid accidental punctures.

Describing the proper location for needle insertion is a little tricky, so refer to the photographs in this article, and also to the helpful diagram located on WesternBass.com's website (www.westernbass.com/ncalifornia/library/newview.shtml?1050).

To locate the insertion point, lay the bass on its side. Draw an imaginary line from the vent (anal opening) to the notch in the dorsal fin (where the spiny dorsal fin ends and the soft dorsal fin begins). Locate the dark sensor line on the bass' side, just above the lateral line, and note where this sensor line intersects the imaginary line you drew. Now count down about 5-7 rows of scales below the sensory line, along the same imaginary line (between the notch and vent), and this is your needle insertion point.

To insert the needle, lift up the back edge of the scale covering the insertion point, and insert the needle through the skin at a 45-degree angle towards the nose of the bass. Needle depth will be just less than half the thickness of the bass. When you hit the swim bladder you may hear the gas start to escape, and you will feel the pressure being released. At this point, submerge the bass so the needle is below the water's surface, and apply pressure gentle pressure to the swim bladder area so that bubbles escape from the needle.

Once the bubbles cease to flow, remove the needle and then release the bass to the water and observe that it returns to the bottom. If you are fishing a tournament and keep this bass in a Livewell, be sure to visually inspect this bass every half-hour. It is common for the swim bladder to seal the needle puncture and the bass will continue to inflate its swim bladder, and need fizzing again. Tournament organizers need to keep this in mind and have needles and trained "fizzers" ready to deflate bass after the weigh-in process.

The first several times you try this procedure you may have difficulty, but you will soon find that it is more difficult to explain the procedure than it is to perform it. Once you do become proficient at fizzing bass, share your knowledge with others so that deeply caught bass have a chance to fight again. I know it works, as I have caught the same tagged 4-pound smallmouth bass from the same piece of structure three times in one winter after I had needled it twice!

Ciao.