



Don't avoid these fish-catching machines because of the difficulty in learning to use them. With these finesse techniques, you'll be a swimbait master in no time

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Rago Bait Co.
Velvick BV 3D

Subtlety With Swimbaits

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SWIMBAIT: *N.* An oversized fish look-alike requiring extra-heavy gear that results in sore arms and shoulders by day's end. And for what? One, maybe two bites a day? Sure, bass willing to eat them are typically better than average. But why sacrifice nonstop action, especially when time on the water is at times a difficult commodity to come by?

For some, the relentless pursuit of trophy largemouth is a way of life that takes patience and persistence. And while there are a variety of offerings capable of taking giant bass, oversize swimbaits have traditionally been one of the most effective tools in the quest for that single big bite.

"Casting swimbaits has always been one of the most aggressive ways to chase monster bass," says Del Rio, Texas, pro Byron Velvick. "It's like bass fishing on steroids! But learning to do it right isn't easy. It takes longer than normal to build up the confidence needed to use swimbaits on a regular basis, and that has unfortunately kept a lot of fishermen from using them."

Velvick adds that in addition to a steep learning curve, two important factors keep the number of bites that most anglers get on the low side: unstable weather and fishing pressure. If you are facing either of these two hurdles, don't try to learn the art of swimbait fishing.

Another problem facing newbie swimbaiters is that you get very little information from the fish telling you whether or not you are performing the technique correctly. Even on great days, you will only get a handful of bites. To combat this problem, California pro Greg Gutierrez employs a subtle approach to swimbait fishing that makes this bait category easier to master.

"Guys are starting to catch on to the fact that there are other ways to fish swimbaits," admits Gutierrez, "and that their usefulness doesn't have to be

(Continued)

Photo: Brian Sak

restricted to targeting trophy largemouth. Swimbait can still be used with traditional methods when bass are aggressive and chasing bait. But catching them takes more of a deliberate presentation when fish are sitting in cover or on structure.”

FINESSING BIG BAITS

To take full advantage of the trophy bass-catching capabilities of swimbait, it's necessary to stick to the oversize models. The key to success when fish are not being assertive, however, is employing somewhat of a subtle presentation.

“When the bite is off, it's time for swimbait fishermen to refine their techniques,” says Velvick, who won the second 2010 Bassmaster Elite Series event by finessing a big swimbait while the rest of the field struggled with similar offerings. “The conditions at the Clear Lake tournament in California were not right, so I had to make them eat my swimbait. And there are several ways to do that.”

Slowing down is the most effective technique Velvick utilizes when force-feeding big swimbait to stubborn largemouth. And as part of his unhurried method, he stresses the importance of doing something different by simply altering the rhythm of each retrieve.

“It's so easy to fish big swimbait too fast,” Velvick explains, “but you really can't be worried about covering a lot of water. It's almost always better to pick areas apart by making multiple casts to key targets. And (by) varying the cadence by pulsing the swimbait and letting it flutter to the bottom, you're letting the bass get a good look at it.”

Coming into contact with structure and cover is another good way to coax bass into biting. But to use this tactic effectively, you must avoid snags and fouled hooks.

“When I'm bumping the bottom or deflecting a swimbait off of a dock, I want a single large hook coming out of the back,” Velvick

Subtle Choices

Berkley, Hollow Belly Swimbait

www.berkley-fishing.com

Koppers Fishing and Tackle Corp.,

LiveTarget Blueback Herring

www.livetargetlures.com

Rago Bait Co., Velvick BV 3D

www.ragobaits.com

Reaction Innovations,

Skinny Dipper

www.reactioninnovations.com

Sébile, Magic Swimmer

www.sebileusa.com

says, “while I want a smaller, protected treble hook in the belly when working grass. The Rago BV 3D that I typically use is a perfect example — the bait's fins are positioned so that they act as weedguards.”

There are a variety of big swimbait available today, but when finesse fishing there are a few things to look for. Given the fact that fish are getting a good look at your bait before deciding whether to eat it or not, anatomically correct offerings are essential. Swimbait that bass haven't seen a lot of are also good choices.

“When the bite is tough, I want my baits to look, feel and smell as natural as possible,” Velvick says. “I prefer soft plastics because they have great detail and great action. When the fish are a little more aggressive, I'll switch to the more realistic-looking hard swimbait. Koppers' LiveTarget Blueback Herring is my go-to bait.”

Big swimbait require stout gear. To help slow down when finessing them, use a low gear ratio reel (5.4:1 is ideal). A heavy action rod with a soft tip allows bass to get more of your bait in their mouth, while 20- to 25-pound-test fluorocarbon line is best for detecting soft-striking fish.

DOWNSIZING

Using smaller swimbait is the preferred tactic for anyone interested in quantity first and quality second.

“When you hear the word swimbait, it does not have to mean an 8- to 10-inch-long lure, weighing 1 1/2 to 2 ounces, that has to

be thrown on 25-pound-test line,” Gutierrez explains. “Bass feeding on threadfin shad or herring are used to the smaller size of these fishes. You can't match the hatch with a big old bait — you have to scale down.”

Downsized swimbait are best suited to fishing around structure in shallow waters. The key to eliciting a reaction-type strike is working them close enough to isolated bass that are waiting to ambush baitfish that happen to wander by.

“It's almost impossible to thread a big swimbait in and out of cover like you would be doing with something like a spinnerbait,” says Gutierrez, “but it is feasible with baits like Berkley's Hollow Belly — you get the maneuverability of smaller lures and the big bass appeal of swimbait.”

While big swimbait are often fished deep or when winds create some surface disturbance, bass tend to be more willing to attack smaller versions fished near the surface or on calm days. Downsized swimbait can also be fished faster under finesse conditions.

Like Velvick's big swimbait approach, Gutierrez when downsizing opts for plastics under the toughest conditions and hard baits when bass are more aggressive.

“When fishing grass structure I want a swimbait with a lot of tail vibration,” Gutierrez admits, “and the most effective bait I've come across is Reaction Innovations' Skinny Dipper. It's incredibly versatile, and I can fish it with an exposed hook or weedless. When I'm catching a lot of bass, I'll switch over to a Sébile Magic Swimmer in the same color so that I'm not constantly changing baits as they tear up.”

Using smaller swimbait means using lighter gear, so specialized tackle isn't required. A slow-speed casting reel spooled with 15- to 20-pound-test monofilament or fluorocarbon should suffice. And any 7-foot medium-heavy rod with a soft tip will work well.

