

5 Presentations for Vertical Structure

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When bass are hanging on structure situated at 90 degrees to the lake bottom, standard horizontal tactics will not suffice

WHEN BASS ARE snuggled against shorelines, lounging on points, burrowed in weedbeds or clinging to river ledges, we can usually come up with a lure or technique to coax them to bite.

In other words, when they're on horizontal structure, solving the puzzle is a bit easier through a process of elimination.

But when the fish are suspended against vertical cover or structure, most anglers assume they're uncatchable or too difficult to figure out.

Not so, say Bassmaster Elite Series pros, who dig into their bag of finesse tricks — some of which are relatively new to the scene — and begin filling limits.

Vertical structure can consist of any number of underwater objects that form a 90-degree angle with the bottom. Classic examples are bridge pilings, bluff banks, deep seawalls, dock posts, and walled grassbeds.

And while bass seemingly prefer the horizontal structure that gives them an easy route between deep and shallow water, they'll use a wall of structure or cover more often than most anglers realize.

"Most people think bass are always on tapering structure or cover that you can see, but the fact is they spend a lot of their life cycle on vertical banks or cover," explains Elite Series pro Michael Iaconelli.

That's especially true when baitfish are roaming the area or when current is moving food sources against the structure. The vertical structure can provide them with a little security and an ambush point from which to feed.

"It's a pattern that tends to work best during the extremes of the seasons, such as in the heat of the summer or during the cold of winter," adds Iaconelli.

Bass will follow the forage, so if the forage is there, obviously the gamefish will be, too. During winter, vertical structure gives them instant access to and from their comfort zones.

"They can move up on a shelf to feed, then drop right back down to the depth that gives them the most comfort," the New Jersey pro surmises.

Shallow water simplifies the matter, but when that structure runs from the surface to a deeper bottom, the problem is magnified. The bass can suspend along it and be just about anywhere.

That's where finesse tactics are the stronger choice, and according to Elite Series pros, those choices are numerous.

Here are some of the various methods they use for coaxing strikes from bass using vertical structure.

NEKO RIG

The Neko rig is the newest angle to wacky-style techniques. This rig has a nail weight placed in the nose of a floating, straight-tail plastic worm, while the hook is placed in the midsection.

The weight in the nose causes the bait to fall vertically, but you can gently tug on the line and make it quiver during descent.

"It will catch fish close to the structure, and it really shines once it hits the bottom," Elite Series pro John Crews says. "When on the bottom, it sits straight up, and when you move it ever-so-slightly, it makes the worm quiver. You can lift it and let it fall back or shake it along the bottom like a shaky rig. This is a tremendous rig for pressured fish or during the postspawn when the strike zone is relatively small."

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TRY SOMETHING WACKY

The wacky rig is the most obvious for seducing suspended bass with slow-falling soft plastics. The basic wacky rig consists of a worm hooked in the midsection so both ends dangle. However, weightless wacky baits take forever to fall through a deep water column.

Enter the wacky jighead. Jackall Lures made it famous with its Flick Shake rig, but other companies offer similar versions.

Iaconelli uses Tru-Tungsten's Flea Flicker jig in the same manner, calling wacky jigheading the "hottest new technique since drop shotting."

"It really shines around steep breaks, docks, bridge pilings and anytime you have a vertical edge and need to get the bait down faster than a traditional wacky rig," he explains. "It pushes the boundaries between finesse and power fishing."

His lure choices are simple. Iaconelli opts for stickworms (Senko-style) with blunt ends that reverberate during the fall, while some anglers prefer rigging the jighead with a straight-tail finesse worm. In either case, the worm is hooked through the middle so that both ends dangle to the side and shimmer as the bait falls.

Iaconelli calls it an "80/20" bait, noting that 80 percent of his strikes occur while the bait is falling, while the other 20 percent come after it hits the bottom.

The Flea Flicker jighead is offered in four sizes from 1/16 ounce to 1/4 ounce.

"You can play with the weights to get the rate of fall that the fish want on that day," he explains. "I start with the 1/16 when the water is 10 feet or less, or if there isn't much wind. I increase the weight on the basis of water depth and wind, keeping in mind that I want the bait to fall vertically and not drift away from the structure."

That's why it's important to allow the bait to sink on a semi-slack line, to avoid pulling it away from the structure.

"But, you don't want it too slack or you'll miss strikes," Iaconelli adds.

Like the Jackall jighead, the Flea Flicker is made of tungsten, hence the weight has a smaller profile and interferes less with the hookup. In

addition, the Flea Flicker weight is on the shank of the hook, providing a pivot point that helps activate the ends of the worm as it falls.

Iaconelli fishes the rig on spinning tackle with 6- to 10-pound Trilene fluorocarbon line.

Crews uses a similar rig around the shady sides of bridge pilings. He prefers Gamakatsu's pill-shaped Jack Roll Wacky head.

"It's one of the best techniques I've ever used for catching suspended fish," he says. "Once you get the bait to the depth you want to fish, shimmy the rod on a semi-slack line. That makes the worm collapse and elongate. I don't know what the bass think it is, but they definitely like it."



GET "SCROUNGY"

Aaron Martens uses his Scrounger Jig Head rigged with a small, fluke-style bait or short, soft plastic worm for fishing ledges.

"It's really deadly when the bass are feeding on small shad because it resembles them so closely," he explains.

The Scrounger, available in weights from 3/16 to 1/2 ounce, is a ball-style leadhead jig with a plastic lip that causes the bait to flutter and shake similar to a Senko-style lure.

Martens will pitch the bait alongside a vertical wall, such as a channel ledge or deep seawall, and let it flutter downward.

"They hit it while it's sinking, or, if I know the fish are suspended, I will swim it along at that depth," he describes. "It's very deadly in the winter-time when baitfish are small or are dying off."

He prefers to use light line on the lighter baits but will use 10- or 12-pound test on the heavier models.

"I've caught fish 20 to 30 feet deep along walls with the half-ounce model," he offers. "Vary your weights based upon the water depth and wind. In more wind, you need a heavier model to keep the bait falling vertical."



WEED WHACK 'EM

Bass will hang in or along the weedy edge of a dropoff on natural lakes, creating a perfect situation for finesse soft plastics.

Michigan angler John Gipson Jr. has become one of southern Michigan's premier fishermen with wacky rigs and drop shot rigs fished along weedy edges. He's used both techniques around milfoil beds in Texas, too.

"If the bass are suspended in the outer edge of the weeds, I prefer a Flick Shake rig to catch numbers of bass," he explains.

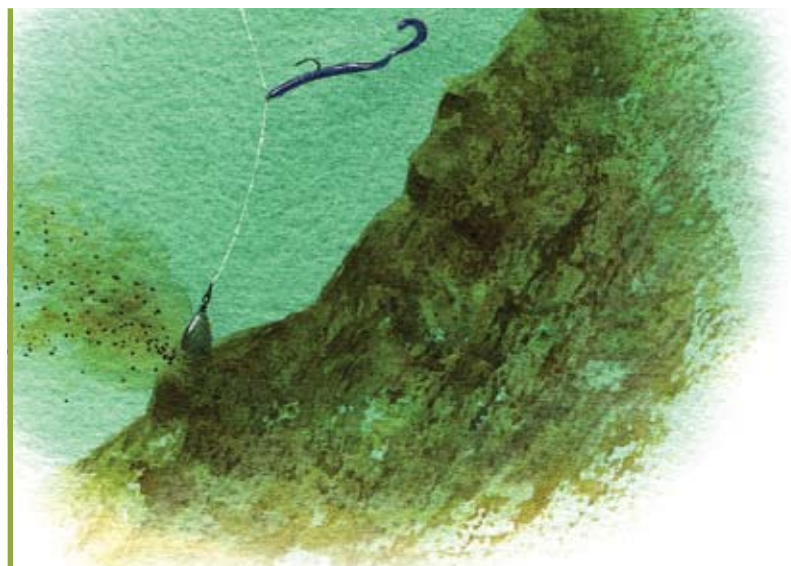
He uses 1/16-ounce jigs if the fish are suspended far off the bottom and 1/8-ounce jigs most other times. He counts the bait down until he gets a strike and then tries to duplicate that thereafter. He can adjust the rate of fall by changing lengths of his Flick Shake worms. Longer ones fall a little more slowly.

"You have to watch the line, because oftentimes it will twitch or simply swim off when a bass grabs it," Gipson notes.

He says the drop shot rig with a straight-tail plastic worm is the best way to find fish and cover water. He casts it along the weed edge, feeds it line and watches the line as it falls. Most strikes occur on the fall; if not, he will pull it along the edge, and if the sinker catches in the weeds, he'll shake it — that often triggers a strike.

"You just have to keep experimenting to find how the bass want it that day," he says.

That holds true of any vertical structure. Find the right technique and pattern, and you're going to love fishing vertically as well as you do the more traditional-type structure.



SWIMMING A DROP SHOT

Arizonan John Murray says the drop shot rig doesn't have to be fished on bottom to catch fish along a steep wall.

One of his favorite techniques for fishing steep bluffs or tire reefs — commonly found in the West — is to get tight to the structure and make a long cast with a curled-tail worm as his drop shot lure.

"You never know what depth those fish are going to be holding, so you have to fish various water columns to find out," he explains. "This presentation allows me to cover more water."

He positions his boat against the structure and makes a long cast, engaging the spinning reel when the lure hits the water and allowing the bait to pendulum back to him. He turns the reel handle slowly to retrieve the bait before casting again.

"If you think the fish are real deep, you can deadstick it as it falls and get the bites," he offers.

Also, he notes, keep the bait in the shade of the structure during hot weather peri-

ods because that's where the bass will be.

"That small curly tail worm activates while the bait is falling and continues to move when you wind it back to the boat," he describes. "It's sort of like fishing a crankbait, except you're using a more finesse presentation."

He uses a 3/16-ounce Kanji tear-shaped sinker because "it swims through the water well," and either a 4 1/2- or 5 1/2-inch curled-tail Roboworm or Berkley Power Worm.

Other presentations might work, but he believes the drop shot provides a more seductive action and swims the bait naturally.

"The small curly tail helps the bait suspend better and tracks nicely when you're swimming it," he explains.

Murray admits the technique takes a little practice to get the bait at the precise depth where the fish are living.

"But, the beauty of this is you can keep the lure tight to the vertical structure and fish it in 2 feet or 40 feet," he says. "So, it really is a versatile presentation."

