Nothing soothes the soul like a warm bass on a cold winter’s day.

Wherein rests such bliss?

Cooling lakes for fossil fuel and nuclear power stations serve as hot tubs for bass and hibernal oases for bass fishermen. At times, they offer the best of warm and cold weather fishing: warm, active bass in tight winter schools.

Finding tight concentrations of fat bass is part of power plant fishing’s particular appeal. Catch one, catch a dozen … or 50! Another benefit is a 12-month growing season. While the metabolism of bass in surrounding waters has slowed to an occasional heartbeat, bass in these turbo-charged waters are chasing baitfish and packing on pounds.

Successful power plant fishermen learn to go with the “flow” — the current of hot discharge water that keeps winter waters at spring or even summer temperatures. Utility companies draw water from the reservoirs to cool power station turbines. Turbine-heated water moderates lake temperatures, causing a wide gradient of water temperatures between one section of a lake and another. Areas with warm, oxygenated water draw schools of baitfish into small areas and bring numbers of big bass along with them. They may also trigger early prespawn and spawning movements.

Here are several winter/spring strategies for smokestack bass.

**TOPWATER CHRISTMAS**

Not many fishermen associate snowflakes and snowmobile suits with a topwater bite. Tab Walker is the exception.

“I caught over 100 bass on topwaters when we still had mistletoe hanging in the lodge a few years ago,” says Walker, a guide at Newton Lake in central Illinois and owner of Outdoor Sportsman’s Lodge in Newton, Ill. “They all came from an area not much more than the size of your living room.”

The winter topwater bite is not a fluke, Walker maintains. Temperature-sensitive threadfin shad seek sanctuary in the warmwater arm, which may hold 60-plus-degree water. The thick masses of schooling shad make easy targets in relatively shallow areas.

“Schools of bass push wads of shad to the breakline and start crashing on them,” says Walker. That’s his signal to put a Chug Bug, Rebel Pop-R or Heddon Spit’n Image to work. Really big fish may call for a Heddon Zara Spook, Lucky Craft Sammy or Booyah Bi-You Buzz.

**GO WITH THE FLOW**

Timing is everything. Prime time for cooling-lake fishing coincides with power generation at the host plant. Smart anglers look for smoke signals.

The discharge of large volumes of generator-heated water (120 degrees or more) often creates a readable current in the cooling reservoir. When you detect it, think like a stream fisherman and go with the flow.

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“Fish will face into the current just like they will in a stream,” says Brad Wiegmann, who guides on waters in northwest Arkansas, including Swepco Lake, the cooling impoundment for Southwestern Electric Power Co.’s Flint Creek Power Plant. “Present your baits just like you would in a stream, casting up and bringing the bait downstream.”

Wiegmann concentrates most of his fishing time in the upper third of the reservoir near the utility plant. But he alerts anglers to look for other sources of moving water as well. Like many cooling lakes, Swepco has a secondary discharge in addition to the primary flume from the plant. Water recovery systems, called “pump backs” by some, draw water from a variety of sources to maintain lake levels. They, too, may create current and draw hot bass action.

“Fish will position themselves on any break or eddy off of a discharge,” says Wiegmann. “Since there are so many fish in these current areas, it’s often good to drift a worm unweighted in the current.

“Temperature, water clarity and forage base ... before you go to a power plant, ask about these three things — and, of course, if the water is pumping.” Wiegmann suggests. “And if you don’t live near the lake, call someone who does. Ask them to check the smokestacks for you.”

**RAPPIN’ AND CRANKIN’**

“Power plant lakes provide bass fishing as good as you’ll find anywhere,” says John Wright, a tournament angler and cooling-lake specialist who fishes a variety of power plant waters in Illinois and Indiana. Among his favorite hot tubs is central Illinois’ Sangchris Lake in Christian County. He often starts his winter fishing with jigs and plastic baits such as the Rebel Wee-R, Bandit 200 series or Bagley’s in chartreuse and black for shallow fish. Later in the season, his crankbait selection includes the deeper running Bomber Fat Free Shad and Norman DD22. He backs up his moving baits with flipping tubes or jigs.

Banging crankbaits along riprap where water runs warm is a signature tactic on power plant waters. Dams and railroad trestles are prime sites, though many power plant lakes in lowland areas sport long stretches of riprap along causeways and vulnerable shoreline.

**TRAP IN THE GRASS**

Quality beds of vegetation always draw bass. On some lakes, the warm cooling water can supply beds of green all year long.

“Key on the grass edges,” says Chuck Ditto, guide and owner of Gregory’s Resort near Shelbyville, Ill., and owner of Parasite Tackle in Shelbyville. “That’s where you’ll find the majority of the bass.”

Ditto often tackles winter grass bass in the coontail beds of Coffeen Lake in Montgomery County. There he combs the deep weedlines with lipless and small crankbaits. If fishing gets tough, he looks for bass buried in the grass with jigs and plastic baits rigged with his Parasite clips and bullet weights, which keep plastics in place even through tough contact with vegetation.

Moving with the water temperature is critical to consistent success. Where possible, he targets areas where the water temperature ranges from 65 to 68 degrees.

“Fish seem to be most active at these temperatures,” he says. “A temperature gauge is very important — at least to my confidence level. ... If you catch some in a place one day and it’s 10 degrees cooler the next, the bass will move.”

**WIND, RAIN AND FIRE**

For guide Greg Heath, it’s all about wind, current and water temperature in late winter and early spring. On LaSalle Lake near Marseilles, Ill., he seeks out windblown banks with water temperatures at and above 70 degrees.

“The windier and darker it is, the better,” says Heath, who often delivers mixed bags of 50 to 80 fish with largemouth and smallmouth heavy in the mix. “If you find a strong current with 70- to 75-degree water and wind blowing on the bank, you can catch a lot of fish.”

Fish will often stack in 200-yard stretches under such conditions and provide daylong action.