

During those lazy, hazy days of summer, when low rainfall and high temperatures are the norm, bass fishing can be tough on river systems. And anyone can struggle, even some of the best anglers in the country.

"Summer is without a doubt the toughest time to catch bass on a river. There's normally not a lot of current. And the fish don't hold tight to cover. So it's hard to develop a pattern," admitted Arkansas Bassmaster Elite Series pro Stephen Browning.

That doesn't mean it can't be done, however. What it takes is a little knowledge mixed with equal amounts of determination and effort. The most important thing is an understanding of the many factors that dictate bass behavior.

"When there's no current, I try to key in on the baitfish," Browning explained.

And weather conditions generally dictate where that forage will be located.

On bright days with lots of sunshine and heat, forage species will usually congregate inside the main river. So Browning focuses on locations where bass are most likely to set up ambush points in pursuit of this forage.

First thing in the morning, for instance, Browning ties on a topwater lure such as the Pop-R or Chug Bug in shad and bluegill patterns. These lures can produce steady action on the downcurrent sides of river bends and behind jetties.

Once the topwater action slows down, Browning turns to slower presentations and focuses on isolated cover on shady banks. That might sound counterintuitive for a hot summer day, but Browning believes black bass inside rivers are special creatures.

"I really don't let water depth determine what I'm going to be doing," he emphasized. "You can catch fish in 2 feet of water. They can live in 2 to 8 feet even during blistering days of summer."

Scattered laydowns are prime targets in Browning's pattern, obviously. But so are moored barges that provide plenty of shade, along with deeper water depths.

"Fish can tuck under those barges in that shade," Browning said. And he advises his fellow anglers to follow his lead.

The best tools for putting together a solid summer pattern in a river-type fishery are worms rigged Texas style or rigged on shaky head jigs.

"I use 1/8- or 3/16-ounce Texas rigs or 1/16-ounce shaky heads," he detailed. "That slow fall may catch them, but you can get them on the bottom if you need to."

The deliberate descent of these lures is especially critical to stimulating bites around barges.

"The fish suspend right up under the barge," Browning said. "If you're throwing a heavier weight, the lure will go right past them. But that slow fall tends to get that extra bite."

Line-watching is important no matter what cover is being fished, he stressed. In other words, strikes can be subtle, thereby making visual clues all the more important to a successful fishing strategy.

"You have to pay attention to that line. If you're fishing in 10 feet of water, you need to know how long it takes for that bait to get to the bottom. If it stops before then, you need to set the hook."

Such concentration can be a tall order because bites likely will be few and far between.

"You're going to get one bite here and one bite there," Browning said.

But that can change quickly under overcast skies. "The bass just move a little shallower, and they're a little more aggressive," he said.

Bass are still found along main river banks, but Browning said they also venture into backwaters.

"They love those lily pads in the backwaters," he said.

Without the sun to put fish on those isolated pieces of cover, Browning knows this means bass can be anywhere. More aggressive baits allow him to fish much faster and locate these areas.

"I really try to cover a lot of water," he said.

Thus, Browning advises others to switch to buzzbaits and spinnerbaits when these conditions warrant. "I'm working them pretty quick. I'm going for those aggressive bites."

He's quick to emphasize that there's a fundamental difference between overcast days and sunny days and a river during the summer season. "A lot of times you'll find the fish bunched up in one small area. You'll fish along without a bite. But when you get bit, slow down and hunker down."

Laydowns along the shaded bank are prime targets regardless of the depth.

Anchored barges often harbor plenty of potential in the summer months.

Search for strikes in the eddy water behind river bends early each morning.

Venture into the backwaters when skies become overcast and the fish scatter.

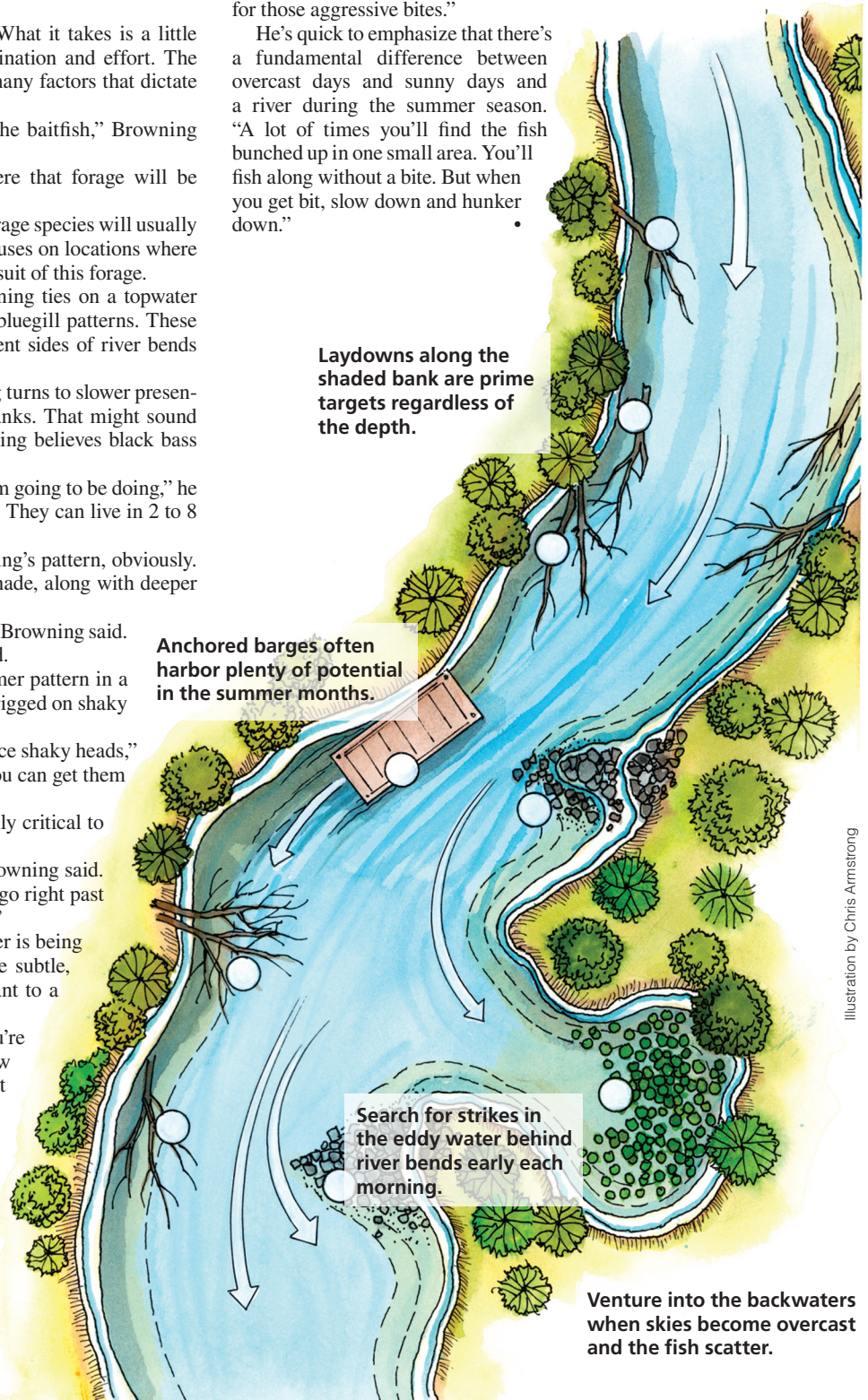


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