

River systems can be maddening. Most anglers simply try to get out of the main river channel to target bass in the relatively stable conditions found in backwaters.

That basic philosophical approach to summer bass fishing is a mistake, according to Bassmaster Elite Series pro Kevin Short, especially in a river during the summer months.

“If you can find a good sandbar, you can catch a limit fast. The shad get on the sandbars and it’s a very consistent bite,” said the well-known Arkansas pro.

Sandbars build along turns of almost every river, but the Arkansas pro said only certain sandbars are likely to hold strike potential. If you can figure out which ones will produce, the rest is easy.

“You’re looking for the ones that the tops stick out of the water.”

Bass fishermen have become so accustomed to targeting cover — whether it’s aquatic vegetation or submerged wood — that they often overlook situations in which the structure becomes the cover. And this is what happens inside a river where sandbars form.

Everything inside a river revolves around current. Where this current deposits sand and sediment to form a bar, the structure itself is seldom uniform. The sandbar often features steps or ripples, which often become perfect ambush locations for actively feeding bass.

“The rolls will be 2 to 3 feet deep, so fish can actually get down in them,” Short said. “The top of the rolls will be a foot or less under the water.”

However, it’s important to understand that these structural features can be located perpendicular to the current. These provide the “slack water” that black bass utilize when feeding and resting. Conversely, ripples or bars that are formed diagonally or parallel to the river’s flow simply channel the current, and the fish can’t effectively ambush prey.

The final factor that can sweeten a gravel bar or sandbar inside a river for a fisherman is one that features a steep ledge falling into deeper water, which

allows bass to pull off the sandbar between feedings. These holes are often the result of river scouring, where strong current and high water volume in the past have carved out a depression behind structure in the eddy water.

“You’ve got to have at least 8 to 9 feet or a good gut next to it,” Short explained. “You’ve got to have that drop; it can’t slope into the deeper water.”

Once the choices are narrowed, Short said the next move involves experimentation, finding out which bars are holding bass. “Not all of them will hold fish. But the majority of the ones that have sharp edges — if they’ve got those guts, if they’ve got those ripples, if they have all the ingredients — they’ll hold fish.”

While a limit can be put together any time of the day, the best period is between 11 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., the time when most anglers assume the action is over for the day.

“When the sweat is rolling off the back of your legs, when there’s no wind, no clouds, that’s the best time to be on the sandbars. I’ve had tournaments where I didn’t have a fish until 10 a.m., and then I left them biting.”

Short’s two favorite lures are crankbaits and topwaters.

“I have caught them on a big spinnerbait at times, but crankbaits and topwater baits are the first two I’m going to throw,” he explained.

Productive topwaters include prop-type baits or walking baits measuring no more than 4 inches in length.

“Most of the time, the shad you see them chasing are only 4 to 5 inches long, so you want to match that size,” Short said.

But Short cautions that topwaters are usually only effective when the bass are really active.

Crankbaits, on the other hand, are consistent producers because they dip into the small guts in which bass are positioned.

For a natural presentation, Short moves his boat

to the downcurrent side of the bar and makes long casts over the shallowest portion of the structure.

“That crankbait runs right across the sand. Sometimes it’s hard to keep the bait from blowing out. That’s when it hits the top of the ripple. It comes across the top of the ridges and then flattens out when it hits the dips. It’s a very erratic action.”

He said bluebird days are best because fish simply don’t seem to lock onto the shallow bars under cloudy skies.

“I don’t know why, but I just don’t catch them as well when it’s cloudy,” Short said. “They seem to move to the sharp edges.”

Heavily stained water also can make the pattern less effective.

“The clearer the water, the better the bite: They will actually hold tighter. In stained water, they roam around a bit, while in that clear water they’re going to be right on the drop or right in the small guts on the bar.”

Clear water mandates a quick retrieve.

“When it’s clear, you’re strictly trying to get a reaction bite,” he continued. “You have to work your lure faster; you have to reel that crankbait faster. You’re really bringing it home.”

Short said he will often locate three or four key bars and spend his day hopping from one to the other. However, he said, patience is a key to the pattern.

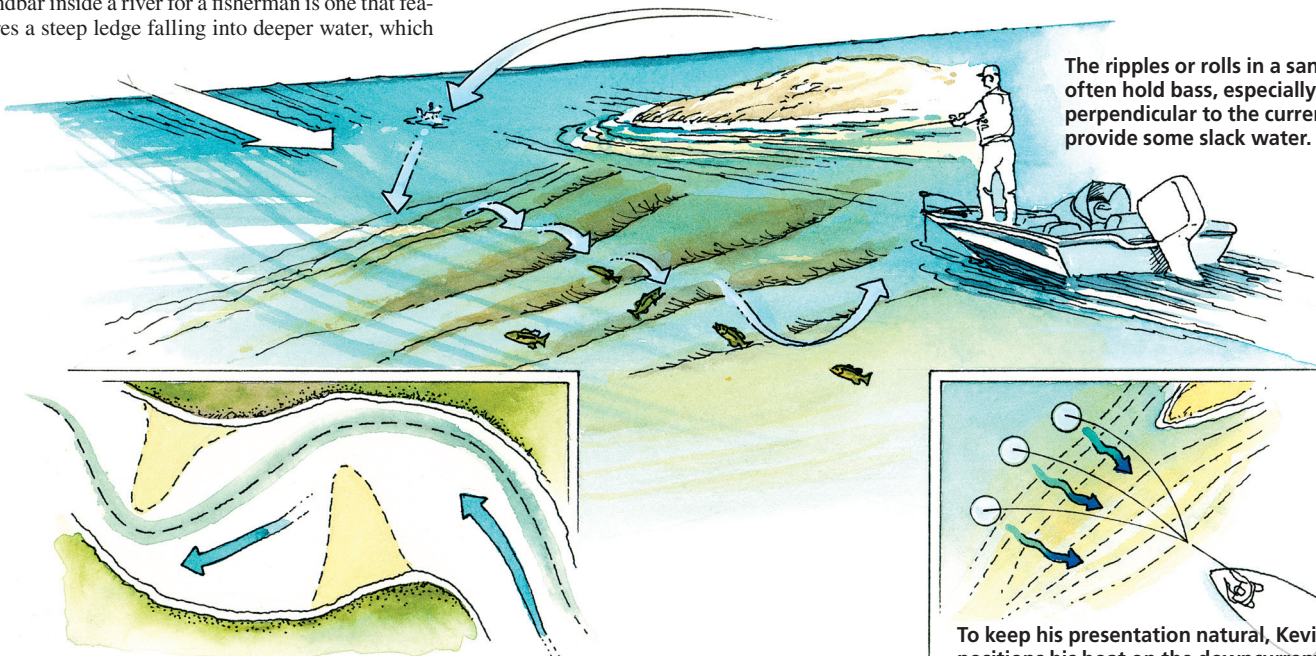
“The nice thing is, if you sit here long enough, they’ll come back up [on the sandbar],” he said. “That’s the dinner table.”

However, Short leaves if he catches several undersize fish.

“They seem to school together, but I come back later because there might be a time of day when the big ones come up.”

If you find yourself fishing on a river this month, forget the backwaters. Follow Short’s advice and you might find yourself catching bass off the hot spots that everyone else has overlooked.

The ripples or rolls in a sandbar will often hold bass, especially if they’re perpendicular to the current and provide some slack water.



Rivers and streams deposit sediment and create sandbars on their inside turns. The bars break current and hold bass.

To keep his presentation natural, Kevin Short positions his boat on the downcurrent side of bars and makes long casts over the shallowest portion of the structure.