

## An Uneasy Relationship

"Bass, being opportunistic predators, will feed on bluegill when they're readily available," Florida pro Bobby Lane told *BASS Times*.

"But bass have an uneasy relationship with bluegill. The bream's round, flat body profile and spiny fins may cause it to become lodged in a bass' throat unless it's taken head first and unless the bass is big enough to handle it. For this reason, bluegill are primarily preyed upon by large bass – fish 3 pounds and up. This is good news for tournament anglers, because it means you'll often catch bigger fish when you're using a bluegill imitation."

But bass don't attack bluegill strictly out of hunger, Lane continued.

"Bluegill trigger an aggressive territorial response from bass. Like salamanders [plastic lizards], they're nest robbers. They'll dart onto a bass bed and pick off eggs until they get run off or eaten. It's common to see a big wake on the surface when you're approaching a shallow bedding area – that's a bass either chasing a bluegill off its bed, or grabbing it before it can gobble up more eggs. No wonder a lure that mimics a live bluegill can get busted big-time when you work it through a bass bed."

North Carolina pro Marty Stone said that although bass may wolf down a bluegill any time one wanders within striking range, their most likely occasion for a bluegill buffet is

when the panfish are spawning. "Bluegill spawn after bass spawn, when the water temperature hits 68 to 74 degrees," Stone said.

"Their nests look like whitish craters, dinner plate to tire size. They spawn in colonies, so you'll often see multiple beds in a prime bedding area such as a shallow cove. Hungry post-spawn bass will hang around the perimeter of a bream bed and pick off any bluegill that venture out of their nest. Working the right lure around the outer edges of the bed can score a real toad. I've caught 9-pounders on this pattern."

## The Right Cues

Both Lane and Stone insist that in order for a lure to successfully mimic a live bluegill, it must project these specific visual cues:

■ **Erratic movement** – "The bluegill's round, flat body makes it a poor straight-line swimmer, yet gives it extreme maneuverability in tight spaces," said Lane. "Bream dart erratically when pursued or when chasing prey, and so should a bluegill-imitating lure."

■ **Suspending at rest** – "Bluegill will hover or suspend when inactive," said Stone. "They'll hang over the tops of submerged weedbeds or suspend in the branches of submerged trees, often in schools."



**It takes a big bass to swallow a live bluegill. This 4-pounder hadn't quite finished swallowing its bluegill meal when it hit a shallow crankbait.**

Photos by Don Wirth and Laurie Tisdale

■ **Coloration** – Both pros emphasize that color is hypercritical when choosing a bluegill lure. "Bluegill coloration ranges from hot chartreuse and neon blue to copper, bronze and green, and several species of sunfish often inhabit the same body of water, all with different color patterns," Lane explained.

In early spring when the lake is murky, bright hues such as firetiger, chartreuse, yellow and orange are convincing natural colors, but both pros suggest more subtle shades such as translucent blue or olive green when bluegill are spawning and the water is considerably clearer.

Our experts differ dramatically on the specific lures they use to mimic live bluegill and when they use them.

"I primarily use bluegill imitators when bass are bedding," Lane detailed.

"My favorite presentation is a black-and-blue jig with a green pumpkin trailer. This seemingly odd color combination captures the look of a live bluegill perfectly.

"I'll pitch it onto the bed, then hop or shake it."

Lane prefers a chartreuse Reaction Vibrator swim jig during the immediate prespawn and postspawn periods: "Like a live bluegill, this lure has an erratic swimming motion and is capable of snaking through shallow weeds."

Stone relies on bluegill mimics heavily when these forage fish are spawning: "My go-to lures for this application are Lucky Craft BDS 1.2 and 2.2 square-billed crankbaits custom-painted in a bluegill color pattern," he said.

"I'll cast the crankbait to the outer edge of the bream bed, grind it down six to eight cranks, then move the lure with a couple of light twitches of the rod tip. This pattern usually causes any bass lurking nearby to come unglued."

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## Bodacious bluegill baits

**W**hat makes a lure an effective bluegill mimic? Erratic movement and bold coloration, for starters.

But according to Bassmaster Elite Series pros Bobby Lane and Marty Stone, a lure doesn't always have to be a perfect clone of a live bream to elicit an aggressive feeding or territorial response from bass. Here are some artificials to try when bass are keying on sunfish:

- Square-billed crankbaits
- "Minus" crankbaits
- Lipless crankbaits
- Swimbait
- Jigs
- Swimming jigs
- Frogs
- Surface poppers

