

Bass anglers are opportunists when it comes to the pursuit of trophy bass, exploiting a “window of opportunity” that opens briefly during a transitional period marked by the arrival of warm weather.

In short, spring is the season when giants appear.

Several factors converge to create this unique opportunity. From a biological perspective, the contributing factors include body weight — egg-laden females typically reach their peak condition as the spawn approaches — and the fact that the largest females move shallow to spawn only once a year.

In addition to the shallow location, where the spawn occurs and where the majority of lures are thrown, trophy bass’ vulnerability is also connected to their defensive behavior around a spawning bed.

Then there’s the vast knowledge reserve about the spawn itself. More research has been conducted and more articles and books have been written about the black bass’ spawning cycle than any other single phase of its life.

While fishing for trophy bass during the spawn remains controversial, it’s hard to argue with the results. The vast majority of world-class catches have come during the spawning months. And as long as there are anglers out there who measure their success by the size of the trophies they catch, the pursuit of giants will continue.

As this brief window of opportunity opens across a large part of the country this month, and in the months ahead in Northern latitudes, *BASS Times* provides the following overview of the spawning cycle and the behavior that drives bass into shallow water.

PRESPAWN

Before the spawn begins, female bass begin moving out of their deep winter haunts into what’s known as the prespawn transition. Driving this movement are two factors — warmer water temperatures and the corresponding lengthening of daylight hours.

The body mass of a female bass is approaching its annual peak because it is carrying eggs and its energy level is hitting on all cylinders as it prepares for the rigorous weeks ahead.

According to the experts, this is when anglers are most likely to catch the fish of a lifetime.

Dr. Mike Allen is one of the country’s leading authorities on bass behavior, and he has studied black bass extensively. As an associate professor with the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences at the University of Florida, Allen attributes this to the overall condition and behavior of a big female at this moment in her life.

“Big bass become most vulnerable to angling just prior to the spawn when fish move shallow. Bass continue to feed aggressively, and they move into fairly predictable zones.”

Based on research, most anglers already know the *when* and *where*. The transition begins when the water temperatures approach the 50 degree mark on their way to the magical 60 degree sustained water temperature.

Staging areas are fairly predictable. They are usually prominent pieces of cover — or variations in structure — that are located between deep water and a population’s traditional spawning area. Bass often use the same staging areas every year.

Most anglers prefer to fish for trophy bass during this prespawn phase because they feel more confident about catching them. And it’s during this transition when big bass actively respond to artificial lures.

“Metabolically speaking, bass are more active during the summer than spring, so it isn’t just activity that contributes to the prespawn angler catch. The prespawn period concentrates a large percentage of big bass in areas where anglers can access them, and that, combined with increased bass activity, enhances an angler’s odds of catching trophy bass,” explained Allen, a columnist for *BASS Times*.

On average, more giants are caught during the prespawn than any other time of year.

“In southern Florida, the biggest fish are typically caught staging during December

or January. From central Florida northward, it happens during late January through the middle of February.”

The farther north you travel in North America, the later this spawning cycle happens. In Canada, for example, the cycle might not begin until June. Again, it’s determined by water temperature and daylight hours.

Also, because the spawn is so closely connected to water temperature, it makes sense that it begins later and lasts for shorter durations the farther north you travel.

SPAWN

Once the water temperature reaches the lower 60 degree range (the temperature may vary by degrees above or below this mark, depending on several external factors) and remains steady for several consecutive days, the spawn officially begins.

Fish move into the shallows and become more visible than at any other time of the year. Females remain in the shallow water for only a brief period of time, usually two to six days. But male bass remain shallow longer because they become the guardians of the hatch.

It’s common to see males become extremely aggressive while guarding the nest, attacking anything that comes near the bed, whether it’s a small bluegill or an artificial lure.

Although controversial, fishing for spawning fish does have its technical drawbacks. Foremost among them is the tendency of the really big bass to ignore lures once they have settled onto a nest. Case in point was the potential world record largemouth that was caught off a shallow nest in California in 2006. One angler reportedly targeted the fish for an entire day but could not get her to strike. Mac Weakley landed her the following day off the same spawning nest.

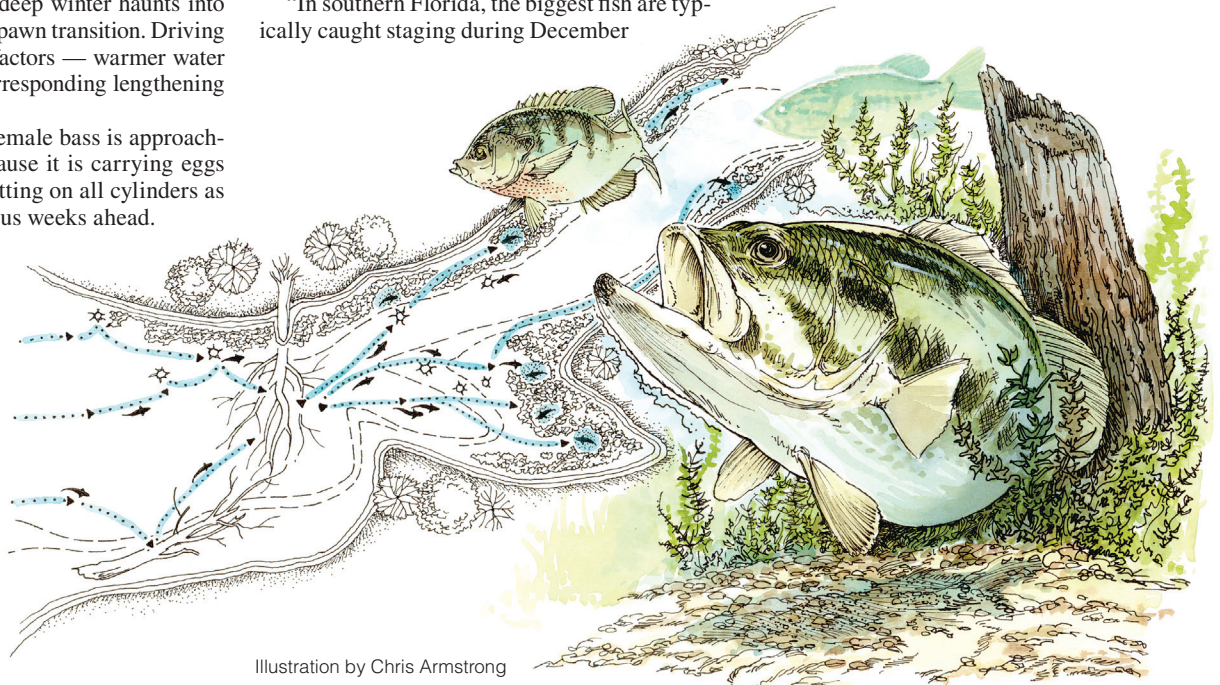


Illustration by Chris Armstrong