

TTrue or False? Fish move to deeper water during the summertime to deal with the heat.

Answer: True. And False.

According to the age-old theory, fish respond to environmental stimuli, and when water temperatures escalate on the surface, bass seek out more comfortable conditions. Actually, oxygen content is a limiting factor more important than temperature.

But where oxygen is sufficient, many bass do head for deep water in summer, and anglers who know exactly where bass are most likely to congregate have a head start on the competition.

Fishing deep structure doesn't fortify the average angler with confidence like fishing visible shoreline cover does. After all, most of us spend our time targeting cover we can see and bump with our lures.

So how can a fisherman gain the necessary confidence for fishing deep? It all begins with an underwater view. Anglers must rely on underwater eyes, and today's advancing electronics are making it easier.

Fans attending the 2008 Bassmaster Classic in February may have heard champion Alton Jones tout his Humminbird Side Imaging Sonar unit. Jones claimed that the device paints a clear picture of a wide swath of underwater features, quickly revealing the locations of key deep structure.

Other pros, including up-and-coming angler Casey Ashley and veteran Tommy Biffle, are talking up the relatively new Navionics mapping chips as vital for finding structure. Maps contained on the chip reveal bottom contours of lakes across the country, assisting anglers in rapidly detecting potential structure hot spots, and perhaps just as importantly, eliminating unproductive areas.

Kevin VanDam explained, "Navionics chips have made discovering productive areas in lakes much easier, especially when searching for key underwater features." Such electronic advancements have become especially important when fishing new waters under the limited practice formats of BASS tournaments.

Boyd Duckett, 2007 Classic champ, takes a unique approach by investigating areas where he thinks anglers might be placing structure, such as long, sloping points. Duckett says, "On many lakes, you can almost tell where guys will be placing brushpiles, and you can even tell which boat docks are likely to have brush around them. Look for the ones which have rod holders, fishing lights and minnow buckets on them. These visible clues reveal which docks are likely to offer the best underwater structure."

OPTIMAL LURES FOR STRUCTURE

Any lure that can go deep will work on summer structure, but a surprising number of Elite Series anglers rely heavily on 10-inch plastic worms. Biffle, for example, uses gigantic worms to fish deep brushpiles, while another Oklahoman, Jeff Kriet, relies on them for a huge variety of structure situations.

"I can fish a 10-inch worm with such confidence because I know it will locate and catch the largest bass holding on deep structure," said Kriet. Confidence means a lot to bass anglers, particularly when fishing deep structure.

Tim Horton fishes the football jig for the same reason, adding, "I have every confidence when throwing the football jig in deep cover that it will get

the job done." Duckett also likes a heavy jig, which he claims often draws bigger bass from deep structure during summer.

For fishing bare or rocky humps, Biffle likes a Carolina rig for fishability and extended time in the strike zone.

Interestingly, tournament veteran Greg Hackney fishes over the top of deep structure with a variety of swimbaits and spoons to entice bass from cover.

Other anglers simply choose to fish their strengths. For example, VanDam likes crankbaits because they are quick and efficient in covering vast areas of deep cover. "Cranking is what I like to do, and I have a ton of confidence in deep cranking," he said, adding that crankbaits are particularly effective when shad are a prominent food source.

Jones also likes a crankbait in summer, and he added a note of caution: "The largest bass holding on isolated deep structure will often attack the first cast, so be ready when you make that initial presentation."

Depth plays a key role in bait selection. Alabama Elite Series pro Steve Kennedy likes crankbaits, but only when fishing to a specific depth.

"Crankbaits are only effective to about 18 feet, so fishing them in deeper cover is a waste," he points out.

Terry "Big Show" Scroggins will only use crankbaits on structure shallower than about 15 feet. Beyond that, he switches to a shaky head worm or football jig.

KNOWING WHEN TO MOVE

One of the toughest things about structure fishing is knowing when to move. An array of questions haunts anglers when fishing deep structure: Are the fish there? Am I using the wrong lure? Wrong technique? How long should I wait for bass to bite?

Duckett points out that summertime bass usually travel in groups, so on deep water structure it's all or nothing. He says a few casts are all an angler needs to determine if bass are on the structure. Duckett makes five casts to underwater structure, and not getting a bite, moves on.

Jones agrees in principle, but he invests a minimum of 10 minutes on a piece of structure in summer before moving on.

But what if anglers can see bass on their fishfinders, perhaps lots of bass, but can't get them to bite? Pros know that timing plays a critical role in determining when bass feed during the summertime, particularly those hanging out in deep cover.

Hackney recognizes the significance of timing and uses it in conjunction with his strategy regarding current flow in reservoirs. Current plays a prominent role for bass feeding patterns in reservoirs, although from the surface it's not evident. When water pours through the dam, Hackney sees an increase in bass activity triggered by subsequent underwater current, thus increasing the likelihood of a strike. Fishing quality deep structure during periods of underwater current shifts should



Anglers' confidence often fades when they can't see or feel the structure beneath the water. Relying on electronics to "see" can get an angler back in the game.
Photo by Eric Engbretson

produce excellent bass fishing.

When Kriet sees numbers of bass on his depth-finder screen but can't get them to bite, he leaves those sites temporarily, returning later in the day, especially during a high activity period.

VanDam, however, uses baitfish as a guide. "I'll give a promising deep structure area even more time to produce if I see baitfish activity on my screen or shad popping on the surface," he explained. "Bass holding on structure will often become active in response to bait activity, sometimes coming all the way to the surface."

The other dilemma facing anglers is deciding when to switch baits. Some pros, including Scroggins, shuffle through several baits in attempts to entice deep bass to bite, while others stick to one or two favorites, opting to change locations if their favorite lures don't produce.

Scroggins usually gives isolated deep structure about 15 minutes to produce. In that time, he'll try an assortment of different baits. He tests a variety of lure sizes, beginning with large profile baits in an attempt to pick off the dominantunker. Sometime during the rotation, he makes sure to fish his favorite shaky head jig.

Kriet also makes sure to throw an assortment of lures at structure, feeling the additional time spent can be well rewarded by establishing a secondary pattern.

DEEP WATER GIANTS

If you're after relatively bigger bass in summer — and who isn't? — these professional anglers all agreed deep structure is the place to invest your time.

Horton specifically targets schools of large bass around deep cover, and if he catches one lunker there, he expects to find others nearby.

"Even if you're not on a deep water pattern," noted Duckett, "deep fish can pay off in a tournament. It might help you pick up an essential bass or two to complete a limit, and it might even provide a kicker fish that makes the difference between a quality finish and the winner's circle."

While bass can be caught shallow in summer, these fish also can be fickle and difficult to pattern. Conversely, if you can establish a pattern deep, you can expect to catch more and bigger fish, the pros say, despite the effects of weather, boat traffic or fishing pressure. •