


SUCCESSFUL METHODS FOR SHALLOW WEEDY LAKES

by Joe Bucher



Shallow, weed-infested lakes can present problems for an angler who is unaccustomed to dealing with such situations. Special techniques and lure presentations are often required.

When speaking of lake types, I'll bet that most fishermen in my part of the country (North) prefer very shallow, heavily weeded, moss-covered lakes the LEAST. These are lakes that have a depth of 12 feet or less and are heavily choked with various forms of weed and algae. Fishermen dislike such lakes due to memorable bad experiences. Lure presentation often seems almost impossible. The outboard motor overheats from weeds clogging the cooling system. The electric motor propeller is continually jammed with weeds. Rowing is almost impossible because the thick surface layer of algae and emergent weeds cling to the oars, making it a herculean task to even lift them out of the water.

All these problems don't seem worth it, just to catch a few bass, especially when it gets to be more of a chore than relaxing enjoyment. Still, when you stop at the local bait shop to pick up a few new lures, and check the monthly bass contest report, you see that ole "Swamprat Jack" has caught the three largest bass of the month — 6 *pounders!* To top it off, they were all taken from the 'Ole Muck Hole'!

You keep thinking to yourself, "There's just got to be an easy, efficient way to fish that lake and nail some of those big hawgs." Well . . . THERE IS! How do you think "Swamprat Jack" keeps catching 'em? He's not as dumb as some may think. In fact, he's a master at his method.

Does this story sound familiar? Well, it's very familiar in my part of town. I've lived on a lake of this type since I was a youngster and was forced to learn to fish this type lake or I simply didn't get to fish! There also happened to be a fisherman similar to "Swamprat Jack", who, luckily, was a good friend of my father's and he would take me fishing during my boyhood. He was an old timer, but believe me, he taught me how to fish this shallow, weedy lake and BOY, did we catch bass. BIG BASS!!

Before I get into exactly how I learned to fish these weed-infested lakes, I would first like to explain the fundamental basics that a fisherman will have to observe before he can even attempt such a lake.

1) A good foundation of basic fishing skills such as casting with pinpoint accuracy.

2) Total knowledge of your fishing equipment's potentials.

3) Specialized lure presentation.

These three ingredients are an absolute must! Technique depends largely upon your ability to place the lure "on the money". A bad cast results in a fouled lure, a few choice words for the occasion, a spooked fish, and a total waste of valuable time. Shallow, weedy lakes often separate the men from the boys, so to speak. This is especially true once the weeds have really bloomed.

Accurate casting helps greatly to produce fish. Tackle selection and lure presentation will be discussed later in the article.

Another basic requirement is a properly rigged boat. The best boat I have found to fit the situation is a 12 foot aluminum Johnboat, Pram design. I like a 12 foot Johnboat better than the fiberglass tri-hulls because it's lighter in weight and can slide over thick weeds easier. The Pram is superior in added stability. Other boats will work, but believe me, this design is excellent. To get the best maneuverability, I add a small, manually operated electric motor mounted on the bow. The electric motor has a weed guard attached which totally eliminates the problem of a weed-jammed propeller.

I carry a canoe paddle along for fishing in extremely shallow situations where the water is not deep enough to use the electric motor.

I lay an old carpet on the floor of the boat; it helps to muffle the noises created from moving tackle boxes, shuffling feet, and BIG BASS flopping around on the boat floor.

As an optional extra I installed a swivel seat in the front of my boat, and it does make a big difference in many respects. Totally eliminated are the sore "rumps", necks, backs and cramped legs that sometimes come from sitting on low conventional boat seats.

I use a rubber or plastic-coated chain stringer, rope stringer, or the new plastic interlock type. These are all good, just so the noise of a chain stringer is eliminated.

Lastly, I mount a small outboard on my Johnboat; one that can be easily lifted out of the water to free the weeds.

O.K., enough on the boat, LET'S START FISHING!

Many people won't attempt to fish a shallow, weedy type lake for two

reasons: 1) They believe fish are scattered; no deep water for fish to school. The odds seem too great against them to connect with any numbers of BIG FISH. 2) Absolutely too weedy; lure presentation and boat maneuverability is virtually impossible.

In answer to reason number 1, I would say there are times when fish ARE scattered in shallow lakes. But there are also many times when they are NOT scattered. In other words, there are times in shallow lakes (or any lake) when the fish are in large schools.

In a deep water lake situation, the fish are schooled tightest when they are inactive (in sanctuary). The more active, the more ideal the conditions are, and the shallower they migrate, the more scattered they become.

Conversely, in a very shallow lake situation, the more active the fish become, the more ideal the conditions, the more SCHOOLED they become. The fish are scattered when inactive and schooled when feeding. *The fish are often schooled tightest during their height of activity.* I consider this an advantage, and if a fisherman knows what he is doing out there he can, at times, have easy pickin's of numbers of real hawg bass. Fish have feeding areas which draw them in shallow water just as they do in deep water.

On many occasions, I have taken up to 50 bass, culling a limit of 4 to 6½ pounders, from one particular spot (in 5 feet of water) without moving so much as 10 feet! These are, of course, extremely ideal circumstances, but believe me, they do happen and they happen frequent enough to predict when you can capitalize on this "GOLD MINE"!

Another point in favor of very shallow lakes is that the fish in an inactive or semi-active state, are usually at a reachable depth (to the angler) for various lure presentations. While in a deep water lake situation, inactive fish are tightly schooled and are extremely hard to locate and present a lure to. Furthermore, I have found these shallow weedy lakes to warm up faster and "turn on" much earlier in the season, than do the deeper, colder lakes.

Figure #1 shows one type of typical very shallow, weed-choked lake that I'm familiar with. It is clean and free of weeds only in the springtime. The lake is about 400 acres in size

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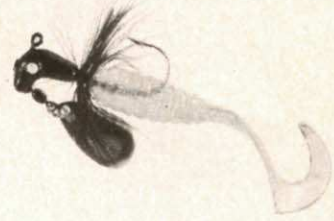
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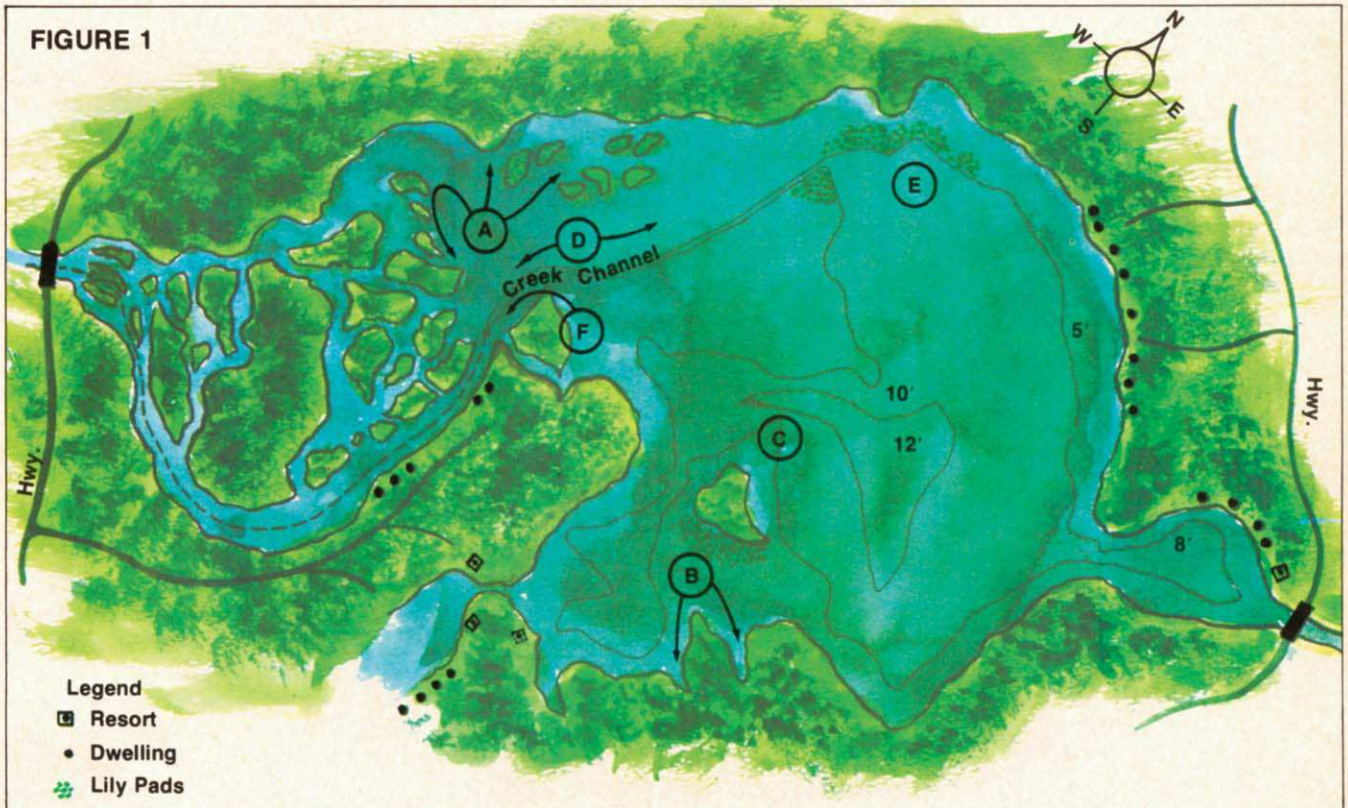
Section A & B are marshy shorelines with sheltered coves, bays and pockets. These areas produce well in very early spring. The discharge of water from the feeder creek in Section A is warmer than the water in the lake proper during very early spring when there's still ice on much of the lake. The small protected

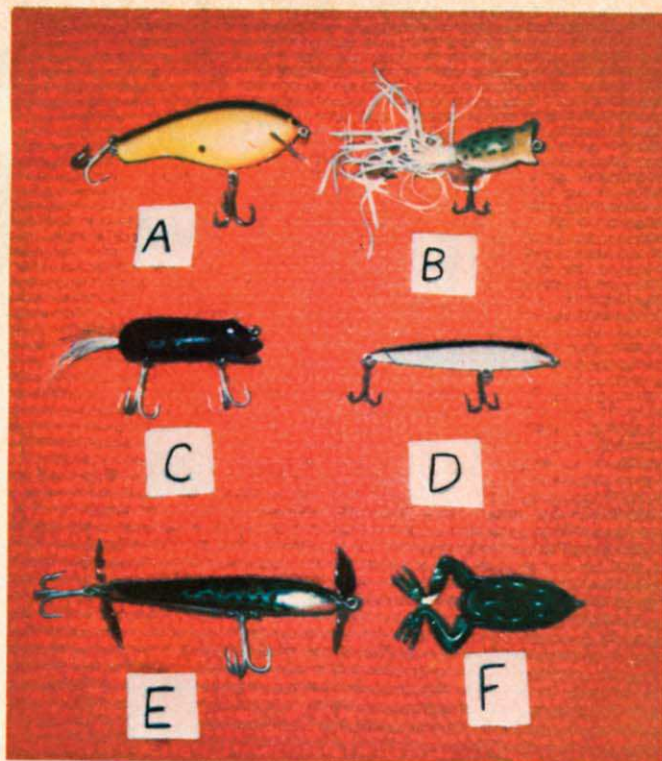
coves and bays formed by the emergent, marshy, bog islands are forms of shelter and are a few degrees warmer than the surrounding open water. These shelters are good areas to search for pre-spawn migrating bass. Bass are in these areas for only a brief time, but if you're on the ball and can recognize these conditions, you can really get into some good early season bass fishing. The lake is open and relatively free of

weeds at this time of the year so a variety of lures and presentations will often work.

My choice of lures would be: 1) Spinner baits in 1/4 oz. and 3/8 oz., preferably tandem models with Indiana blades. In colors, I've found two outstanding colors: black skirt with hot orange blades, and yellow skirt with gold blades. 2) Lindy Spin Rig 1/4 oz. or 3/8 oz. with a 2 1/2 to 4 inch shiner, sucker or chub minnow at-

FIGURE 1





The author's lure selection for weed-infested lakes include: (A) Bagley's Balsa "B", (B) frog-colored Hula Popper, (C) Creek Chub Mouse, (D) Rapala, (E) Devil's Warhorse, (F) Snag Proof Frog, (G) Pedigo Bass Snatcher, (H) Little Jewel spinner bait, (I) Lindy Spin Rig, (J) 3/8 oz. Tandem Spin, (K) 8 inch plastic worm rigged Texas style, (L) Pop-R and worm combination.

tached. 3) Balsa minnow type plugs such as Rapalas, Rebels, Bang-O-Lures, etc. I like the 4 and 4½ inch models in silver or gold. I have found the new models of gold with a fluorescent orange back to be good also. 4) Small fat plugs (alphabet lures) such as Big "O", Big "B", Big "N", etc.

My lure presentation would be working parallel whenever possible and casting way beyond the intended target on the shady side of cover. A medium to slow retrieve should be exercised. Lines of 8 to 10 pound test are my favorites for early spring and this type of fishing. Rarely would I go heavier than 10 pound test at this time.

Bass are easily spooked in this extremely shallow water, so a very quiet approach and lure presentation should be exercised. The use of lighter tackle will put the odds in your favor. Should you get snagged while using the fat plugs or balsa minnow plugs, stop your retrieve and release your line tension completely. This will usually allow your lure to float free of most obstructions.

As the water warms, the bass will move out and seek more ideal spawning grounds. The marshes will also slowly weed themselves shut. Heavy eutrophication takes place

and huge amounts of weeds and algae form in the marshes closing them off to man or fish.

Many of the spawning areas are located just adjacent to the flow of the feeder creek, Section F (Figure 1). This is a direct result of the creek, swollen in early spring from melting snow and ice, creating washouts, exposing harder bottom areas. When the water level recedes, these clean, hard bottom areas are calm and free of current. They become choice areas for spawning largemouths.

These particular spawning grounds are often very close to the marshy banks which offer very good cover. Bass will move into these areas during daylight hours to escape the sunlight and detection. From these undercut marshy banks they can easily guard their nests, ward off predators, and use these hideaways as ambush points.

Lure selection for this situation would now include the deadly plastic worm. As soon as the water temperature shoots above 55°F, bass really start to take the fake wigglers. There are many riggings of the plastic worm that will work. I have two favorites during this period. My first choice would be an 8 inch plastic worm or Mister Twister, with the

hook buried Texas style AND NO WEIGHT ADDED. This rig is so weedless that you can pitch it right up in the reeds, cattails, and brush; drag or climb it up, over and through the cover and "plop" it softly into the water.

The plastic worm technique offers many advantages: 1) The worm "creeps" into the water in a most natural manner, not crashing down out of the sky. This will produce more and bigger bass because you won't spook them. 2) The weightlessness of this rig results in a very slow sinking descent. This is also a natural lifelike action.

I would recommend the softer plastic worms. Sure, you'll have to change damaged worms more often, but I think you'll catch more fish in the process. Isn't that what it's all about? Soft worms have much more lifelike appeal in the way they look and feel. Bass will tend to hold onto a softer worm longer, also.

The other worm rig that I like is a Pop-R Jig with a 6 inch plastic worm or twister style worm added. This lure combination looks so good and lifelike in the water you'll almost be tempted to grab it yourself!

When using either of these rigs, always set the hook immediately upon the strike. Bass in shallow wa-

ter can be extremely vicious, especially when guarding their nest. Ironically, though, they can also eject the worm quicker than a winking eye. During this critical time, male bass will not necessarily take a lure because of hunger or intimidation, but because it's an intruder and must be driven from the nest. Once the intruder is carried far away from the nest, many times the lure or bait will be ejected and the bass will return to the nest to resume guard.

This fact, along with the many obstructions that a bass can tangle your line around if given time to run with the bait, are reasons enough for me to set the hook immediately upon the strike.

Many shallow running crankbaits are also excellent at this time, when properly used. Crankbaits can be pure "nitro" when bass are in the shallows.

As far as lure selection goes, the balsa minnow plugs are good, but the new fat plugs work equally well for this particular method, and at times can be even better! My favorite lure for this occasion is the Balsa — "B", Models BB-3 and BB-4. I like balsa wood lures because they're lighter and the entry into the water is much softer than the hard, plastic-bodied versions. A softer entry in early season can be very important so as not to alarm the fish.

My lure presentation would be casting PARALLEL to cover. Working the area slowly and thoroughly is a must. Cast beyond the intended target whenever possible to avoid spooking those wary lunkers. When your lure hits the water leave it lie motionless for about 15 seconds, then twitch and dance the lure in place. Many of your strikes will come at this time. Thrust the lure forward by pulling with the rod tip and cranking hard with the reel simultaneously. When you feel the lure grinding into the bottom . . . STOP and release your retrieve and thrust. The lure will then rise. When the lure just breaks the water's surface, pull down hard again. Repeat this process all the way to the boat. Be sure to keep your line taut and always follow your lure on the rise, as many strikes will occur at this time. Strikes will be smashing! I theorize that the lure imitates a pesky panfish or minnow. The bass instinctively responds by an all-out attack to stop the intruder.



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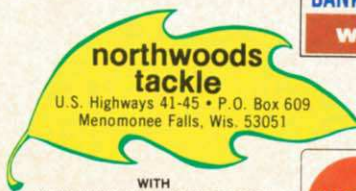
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FIGURE 2

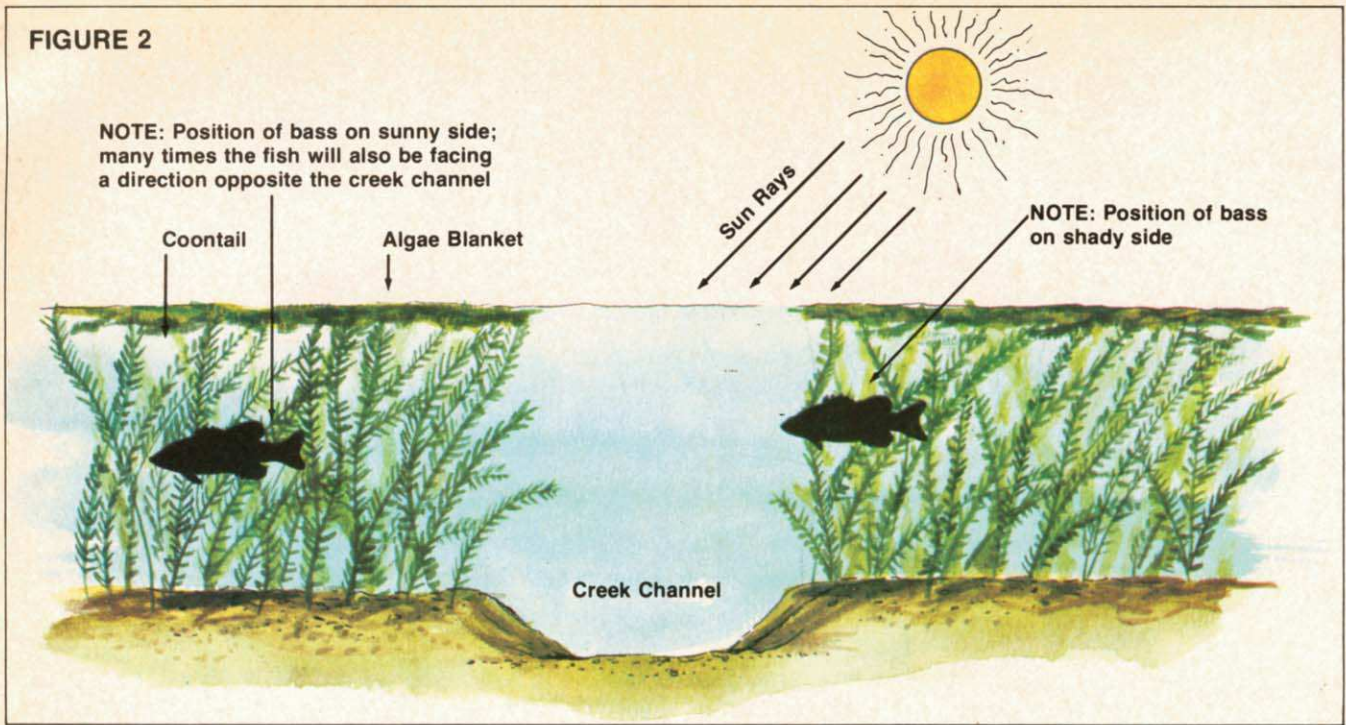


FIGURE 2A

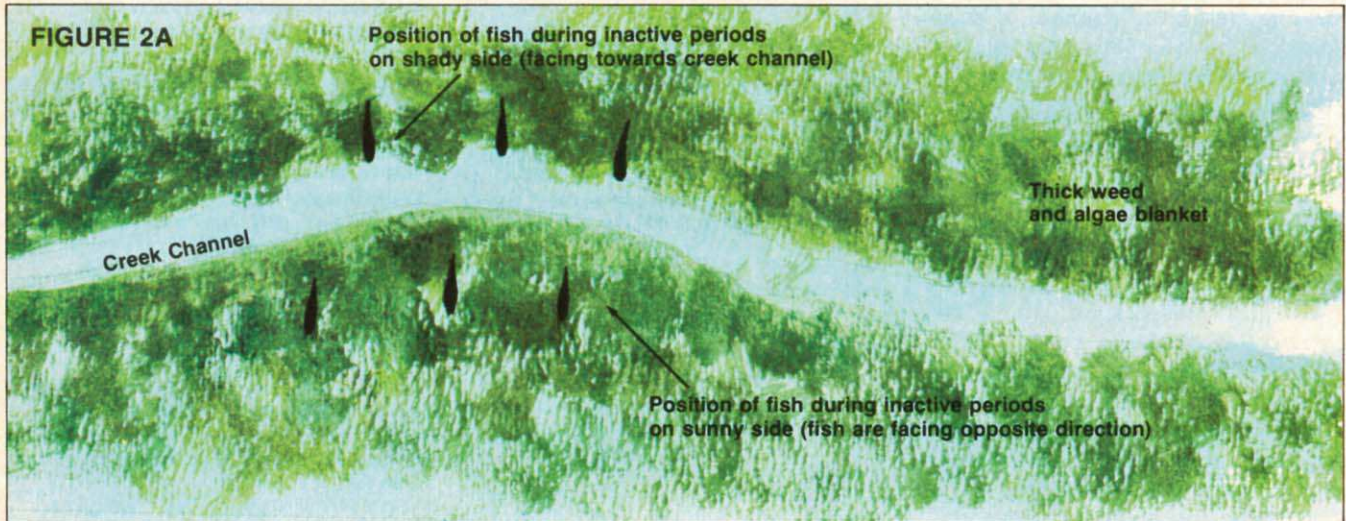
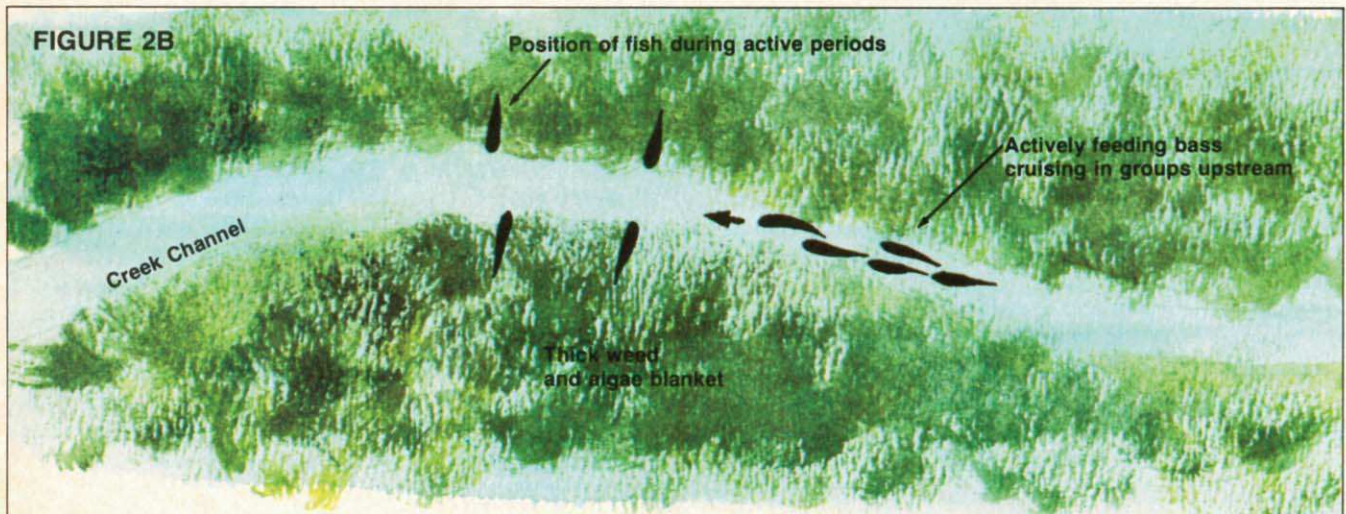


FIGURE 2B



There is a brief period after spawning when extremely good catches can be had. Bass don't seem to be disoriented after spawning in a very shallow lake. I theorize this is because there isn't as great a transition in location from spawning areas to their summer living haunts. In the deep lakes there is a total re-adjustment from a shallow water environment to a deep water environment. Whereas in a shallow lake, they adjust at the same relative depth level.

Areas adjacent to the spawning grounds will still produce some fish, but other areas start producing more. Eventually, as the season progresses, spawning areas and areas adjacent to it are closed off by thick masses of newly bloomed weeds and algae.

Area D (in Figure 1), the creek channel, becomes a main food source for predator and prey alike, and will remain so throughout the summer and far into the fall period. Areas adjacent to the creek channel become almost impassable by boat. At first glance this may appear to be a definite disadvantage, but as you will soon see, it is a fantastic advantage. Figures 2, 2A and 2B depict the extent of feeding migrations in the channel habitat. During inactive periods the bass will filter into the heavy weed and algae blanket to es-

cape sunrays and detection. The bass on the SUNNY side of the creek edge will have filtered further into the weed mass. You will also notice that the fish are facing opposite the creek channel. These fish (facing away from the channel) are difficult to present a lure to. They are well hidden in the vegetation. However, on the SHADY side of the creek channel edge, the bass, in most cases, will be just under the blanket edge (just out of the sunlight). In most cases a lure can be presented to them along the edge of the channel.

In a neutral mood, the fish must either be provoked to strike or be tempted to bite. In either case both methods should be tried if one or the other fails to produce. My lure selection and tackle matchups here would be very specific. I will describe them one at a time. First of all, I would prefer a level wind baitcasting reel or a large model spinning reel loaded with 14 to 20 pound test mono, and a stiff action rod. When you get a large bass on here it will head straight into the heavy weed and algae masses. Once it's in there you might as well kiss him goodbye. You've either got a broken line or a large clump of weeds. In either case you've lost the fish. Once you've hooked the fish, it must be brought out of the water as quickly as possi-



Here's Joe Bucher (author) with evidence of the "gold mine" that exists in many shallow, weedy lakes; two northern pike and four largemouth bass. The bass weighed 3-1/2, 4-1/2, 4-3/4 and 6-1/2 pounds, respectively.

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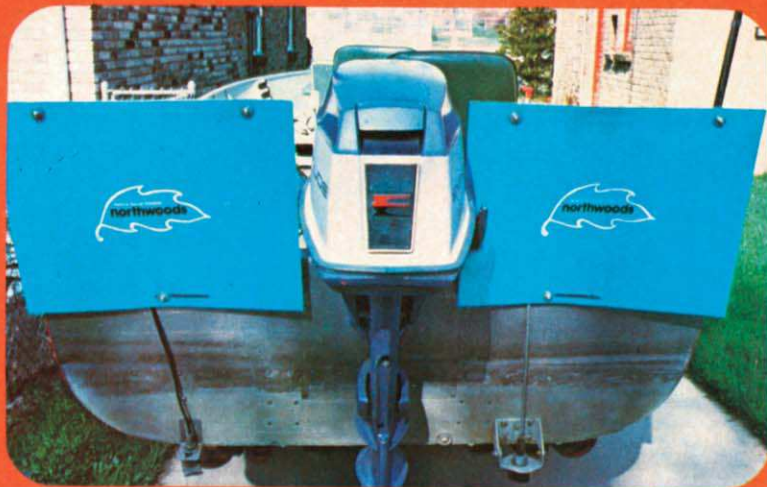
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ble. This is the wrong ballpark for light tackle.

The first lure I would try would be a spinner bait. I use many variations, sizes and colors, depending upon the conditions. I will say this, though; I prefer models from which I can obtain the greatest amount of performance at *slower* speeds. The lure would be buzzed as close to the SHADY edge of the blanket as possible. Now you can see where the accurate casting comes in. Inaccurate casts can keep you IN the weeds more than OUT of the weeds. This only results in wasted time and effort.

Many times, though, the spinner bait is just too noisy either from the initial splash of the lead-bodied lure hitting the water, or the loud vibrations the blades create. The fish will be driven deeper into the weeds, doing more damage than good. This is the time when I tie on either a balsa minnow plug or a fat plug (preferably made of balsa wood, for reasons previously mentioned) and RIP IT. By "ripping", I mean a fast darting

(or "ripping") action.

If this approach does not work I would try a plastic worm. Many times this will turn the tide.

Lastly, I would try topwater baits, and not just ANY topwater bait, but the frog-colored Hulapopper. Topwater enthusiasts can enjoy their type of fishing all summer long on this lake type. I like this lure for many specific reasons. It can be fished very slowly and doesn't even have to be moving to be tantalizing. The rubber skirt will squirm and undulate, while the lure is perfectly still. I believe this is an added advantage over many other types of topwater baits. It will turn on many an ornery, stubborn, hawg bass. Accurate casting is again very helpful in order to be successful in this type of fishing.

When bass are actively feeding in the channel, I modify my techniques slightly. Boundaries on casting would not be as rigid. Casts made into the center and both sides of the channel edge will now often produce fish. The bass are now cruising in

small groups upstream in the channel proper. Lures can also be worked at a quicker pace.

There is one other technique that is worth mentioning before we venture into other areas. This is one of my favorite ways to fish. The lure used is a Pedigo's Bass Snatcher or any similar made lure. This is a lure with an extra large propeller-like spinner on its front end. Cast the lure out and engage your reel just before the lure hits the water. Retrieve the bait so it sputters across the surface. The unique impression that is created by this lure is that of a frightened, fleeing creature trying desperately to escape. I like the large propeller design for two specific reasons: (1) It doesn't have a weighted head, so it lands more softly on the water and can be retrieved at a much slower speed and still be sputtered. This is a big advantage. It gives the fish added time to catch the lure. (2) It has a treble hook on a straight shaft instead of a single hook on a safety pin shaft. I believe the hooking qualities are far superi-



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or. This is a very exciting way to fish. The strikes will scare the living day-lights out of you, so BE READY!

Area E (Figure 1), the lily pads, will also produce good bass at times. Pads may mean nothing in a deep water lake, but are sometimes a major holding area in a shallow, weedy lake. Pockets, paths, and other openings in the pad fields are the areas to concentrate on in the early and late hours of the day. Again, the sun's rays play a very important role in the fish's position. Concentrate on shady sides.

Lure selection would be a little different for this occasion. Again, the plastic worm rigged weedless and weightless would be my first choice. The same methods as previously mentioned would be employed here.

Secondly, I'd choose a lure that many fishermen probably never heard of before. Its design is perfect for swimming through lily pads without getting hung up. This is the lure and technique that made old "Swamprat Jack" famous. It's the old Mouse lure design. The Creek Chub and Shakespeare bait companies are the only two that I know of that still manufacture it. In colors, I like gray, black, and tiger. I modify the lure a little by cutting off the tail and adding a rubber skirt. This is a

very easy lure to fish. Simply cast it out into the open pockets and leave it lie motionless for a good 20 seconds. This is where the rubber skirt really shows its stuff. Then retrieve it slowly back. The lure will swim up, under, around, and through the pads with a minimum of hang-ups. This lure runs through the thickest of pads so well you have to see it yourself to believe it. Strikes can come at any time. As I mentioned before, heavier tackle is in order here. The fish must be hauled out of the water as quickly as possible. You'll have plenty of time to admire him once he's in the boat.

The topwater popper lure can also be used here. It is especially effective in the pads when the bottom extending hook on the treble is clipped off. In this condition there will be a minimum of hang-ups.

For extremely heavy cover situations I've found the Snag Proof Frog to be just the ticket. It's virtually as weedless as weedless can be.

The last area that may be productive during the summer and fall period is area C, the deepest water in the lake. Working the shady side of the weedline with various shallow running crankbaits is, at times, very effective. A slow buzzed spinner bait over the top of the weed flats, clos-



Lily pads may be productive in some lakes and completely unproductive in others, depending largely on lake TYPE. Author, Joe Bucher, nailed these three beauties in a heavy pad field with methods described in the article.

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Here is Fishing Facts artist Wiley Miller's mount of Joe Bucher's 7 pound, 3 ounce Wisconsin hawg bass. The trophy bass was caught on a Creek Chub Mouse lure.

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est to the deep slot, can also be very effective, especially during early and late hours of the day. Lastly, I've had great success using the Pow-RR Head jig and Reaper worm.

At this time a word should be mentioned about night fishing for bass in a lake of this type. Some might say, "I have enough trouble fishing a weedy lake during the daylight, let alone attempting it at night"! In reality it's not very difficult at all. The areas you have to concentrate on are so small that many times you can anchor in one spot and load up with fish without ever moving a foot. Fish feed very actively at night on many shallow lakes.

My favorite night fishing lures are topwater baits. I especially like the propeller type plugs for this situation. The best retrieve I've found is short jerks with long frequent pauses. But be flexible in your retrieves, in any presentation. Don't

get hung up on one retrieve and one method of fishing.

As the fall approaches, the bass will utilize much the same habitat, but they will not be as bottom oriented once the weeds have turned brown and died. The creek channel will always be a well oxygenated area because of the constant fresh-water flow.

I hope I have been helpful in pointing out some of the areas that have been productive for me on one type of shallow weedy lake. I'm no one-method fisherman and I'm not "hung up" on shallow weedy lakes, either. In fact, I fish many different lakes and species of fish throughout the year. I'd just like to shed a little light on a subject that's not talked about too much in hopes that my fellow Fishing Facts readers can enjoy the good fishing that often exists in these shallow, weedy lake types.

