

BIGMOUTH BUFFET: THE SURFACE FLIES

Dew glistened in the first rays of morning light in contrast to the water, which appeared mysterious, dark and still. The stillness was shattered by the noisy splashing of surface feeding bass and hastened our strides toward the source. Our deer hair popper lit with a splat in a pocket of lily pads causing miniature shock waves to alert the subsurface world to its presence. A twitch of the rod tip caused a gurgling lurch of the brightly-colored puff of a fly before it disappeared as the pond bottom exploded with the violent strike of a largemouth bass. Time stopped as the battle raged until the assailant was subdued, admired, and released. Be forewarned: top-water fly fishing for largemouth bass is addictive.

Everything about the largemouth bass lends itself to thoroughly indulging the dry-fly souls of fly fishers from the explosive strike to the visible fight that is often waged above the water's surface. Their eyes are located nearly on the top of their heads so the bass's natural inclination is to search above its position for a meal. The cavernous mouth and extensive menu of this aggressive ambush predator removes selectivity from the fishing equation. But the truth is that big bass are the exceptional catch rather than the rule, and one reason is that they prefer to capture and devour one substantial meal then view their realm for the next several days from a position of security and comfort as the meal digests. The application of this knowledge for the fly fisher is that large flies will give the angler an edge in attracting big bass.

Fortunately, largemouths are also gluttonous and will consume meals dropped directly into their lairs, which underscores the need to fish very tight to structure to increase our odds of inducing strikes from big bass. The lies within structure favored by large bass include weed and/or moss beds. Both cool the water and increase oxygenation. To illustrate the cooling affects of weeds, extend your bare arm first into open water. It may feel like bath water or even warmer. Then, by extending your arm into the weeds or moss you can feel that it is noticeably cooler and, hence, more comfortable for big bass.

Seven, eight, and nine weight rods are our weapons of choice not only because a strong fighting butt is necessary to wrench big bass out of heavy cover but also because our large, wind resistant surface flies require those big rods with bass taper or saltwater taper floating lines to deliver them efficiently. Leaders tapered to tippets of 8- to 16-pound test balance the delivery system.

A variety of popper types, colors, sizes, and materials as well as a selection of floater/divers fill our topwater bass boxes. Poppers with cupped faces create surface disturbances, which imitate struggling prey, trigger the predator's instinct to search them out and attack. Yet the cupped faces cause the disturbances without allowing the flies to advance very far across the water's surface. This is a decided advantage when fishing small pockets in weeds and moss. Closed-cell foam poppers are lighter in weight, readily available in fly shops near warm water destinations, and nearly indestructible, but their lighter weight makes them difficult to cast accurately in the wind. Like the cork versions, they come in a variety of colors and sizes. Poppers can also be tied or purchased that are composed of tightly spun or stacked deer hair. These traditional poppers tend to set in, rather than atop, the water and make a more subtle, some would say more natural, sound when retrieved.

Whatever your material of choice, try these poppers in sizes 2 through 4/0. If the largemouth waters of choice contain strong-stemmed weed growth, such as milfoil or lilies, the addition of weedguards will save lots of aggravation. White and chartreuse are our favorite popper colors because they are easily seen by the bass as well as the fly fisher, but we must confess that black poppers can be deadly under low-light conditions. Fly fishing icon Dave Whitlock ties one of his deer hair poppers with multiple colors. He calls the pattern "Fruit Cocktail," and, according to Dave, allows the bass to choose whatever color they happen to like at that moment.

Poppers with elongated bodies, known as pencil poppers, fill another niche in the topwater bass angler's arsenal. This minnow-shaped popper can be manipulated to imitate crippled or injured baitfish. By using an extra long leader (10 to 12 feet) and casting only a short amount of fly line the angler can replicate the bait-fishers technique called "walking the dog," which causes the lure to change directions from side to side. This maneuver can be accomplished by making a line mend in one direction and stripping to activate the fly. To make the fly change directions, make another strong line mend in the opposite direction then strip line to cause the fly to lurch in that direction. If repeated, the action of the change of direction causes the fly to zigzag back toward the rod tip as if trying to escape from a predator.

An alternative to conventional poppers came to us through the creative mind of the late Michael Verduin. A master tyer and well known to Federation conclave attendees, Michael created the "Ball-Joint Popper" to deal with those difficult mossed-in ponds of his native Texas in summer. First, he clipped a deer hair ball then attached splayed feathers to a shank of .014 stainless wire leader. He created a 3/16-inch diameter oval by putting both tag ends in the vice, and used a small Phillips screwdriver to form a loop in the wire. The feathered tail section is attached to the ball by a loop of 20-pound test mono. With very little manipulation the fly rocks and rolls within the weed pocket with the slightest rod tip twitch providing action to the feathered trailer even after action to the ball is suspended. That tantalizing action within the confines of a small weed pocket is a powerful inducement for big bass to attack the writhing mixture of feathers and deer hair.

Another class of flies that address the water's surface is floater/divers. These flies float at rest but are fashioned with a sloping-style head that enables the fly to be pulled under water a few inches then pop back to the surface when line tension is released. Their effectiveness can be traced to the appearance of vulnerability that is created as a hapless creature tries to swim but cannot go far before coming to rest again. Also, floater/divers provide a more visual target to the bass even when wind makes a choppy water surface.

In the 1960's Dan Gapen described the effectiveness of fishing Muddler Minnows by dressing the deer hair head with floatant then pulling them under and allowing them to re-surface but it took another twenty years before Larry Dahlberg clipped deer hair to form the slopping style head that now bears his name. Once again, cork, foam strips, and deer hair have been used to create buoyant heads for these flies, while a variety of tailing materials, such as strands of tinsel, rabbit strips, feathers, craft hair, and rubber hackle, are utilized to provide flash and action. Utilizing the same principle as Verduin's Ball Joint Popper and applying it to our own floater/divers, we tie Sili-leg tails onto a clipped deer hair head resulting in a fly we call Wilson's Hula Diver. Those tantalizing legs

continue to wiggle after the fly returns to the surface. We favor bi-colored deer hair in fluorescent yellow/orange and chartreuse/red on a size-1 Mustad 3366 hook.

Floater/divers can be fished successfully in a variety of ways. Often causing the fly to quiver by shaking the rod tip activates the tailing material and provokes the bass. Employing a 4- to 6-inch strip then relaxing the line tension can also be deadly, and usually a rhythmic succession of strips and releases is best. One of our favorite retrieves involves a strip to pull the fly under followed by moving rod tip in the same direction at an accelerating pace before releasing the tension. This is designed to simulate distressed prey that may escape before having to return to the surface. Predators like largemouth bass are further stimulated to attack by the possibility of the prey's escape.

Weed lines, especially pockets in the weeds, can provide excellent targets for the surface bass fly fisher as can wood structure like downed trees, brush, and docks. Target the shady side of these structures for best results. As summer progresses and waters warm, fish early mornings when the surface is coolest after the long night. It's easy to understand why generations of bass aficionados have become enamored by the explosive surface strike of largemouth bass. It satisfies the dry fly soul in all of us.

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