

SPRINGTIME SUCCESS ON PUBLIC PONDS

Millions of miniature bass and bluegill factories dot the North American landscape. Many offer easy public access to productive waters that range from those that can be cast across to others of several acres in size. City park ponds, water supply reservoirs, state conservation areas, reclaimed strip mine pits, and small state park impoundments account for many outstanding fly-fishing opportunities that are often found in our own neighborhoods. The problem is that not all ponds are created equal. While some may boast hand-sized bluegills and football-shaped largemouth bass, many offer only a few small fish.

First, observe the lay of the land. Ponds with relatively small watersheds allow less sediment to be introduced into the pond, which makes the water clearer. Larger fish are able to locate and eat fry more easily thus thinning the small-fish population and enabling bass and bluegills to reach the sizes we love to catch. Both species benefit from a balanced predator-prey relationship, but if a trophy bluegill is your objective, choose a pond with an abundance of slow-growing largemouth bass.

Ponds with abundant, submerged vegetation are capable of sustaining good populations of big fish. Aquatic plants provide rearing areas for the fry of both species to avoid predators, feed on invertebrates, and grow. At the same time, vegetation provides ambush points for predators, a shield from overhead sunlight, and a cooler environment, as well as oxygenation. In addition, weedbeds provide structure that's easily targeted by anglers.

The ponds in question should also have shallow areas suitable as spawning grounds for bass and bluegills that offer access to relatively deep water. Spawning success is critical to providing strong year classes for both species as well as abundant forage for adults. The deep water provides a sanctuary to which both species can escape to safety, a refuge from intense sunlight, and allows them, as cold-blooded creatures, to find more comfortable water temperatures.

The final piece to the pond assessment puzzle is the absence of carp and gizzard shad. Carp feed on the all-important vegetation, which causes the quality of the weed-beds to deteriorate, and carp negatively affect water clarity. They are also prolific enough that they can eliminate underwater vegetation entirely. Gizzard shad are common in ponds in the lower Midwest and in the South. The presence of gizzard shad causes the bass to focus their predation on the shad instead of the bluegills. Bluegills will quickly overpopulate, reduce their own food sources, and stunt the pond's population.



A little homework and some advance observation can give any pond aficionado the ability to determine which ponds are capable of providing good numbers of sizeable fish. Checking the size of the dam can help to determine an approximate maximum depth. Shallow areas should have a healthy growth of weeds while deep water will be revealed by lack of weed growth at depths beyond the reach of sunlight. A county topographical map or exploring the surrounding area can easily determine the pond's watershed while discussion with other anglers or a local fly shop owner can provide a preview of the health of the bass and bluegill population as well as information about the presence of other species.



Once the most productive ponds have been determined, the key to early fishing action is monitoring the temperature of the water. Small ponds warm more quickly than large ones. As the thermometer reading creeps into the 50-degree range, male largemouth bass will begin to move to the edges of the shallow flats. Their metabolism will increase, causing them to feed actively. If there's an inlet creek that is activated by the runoff of the spring thaw or rains, it's an excellent location for the first casts. Even a trickle of incoming water adds a couple of degrees of warmth to the area.

Small, light-colored flies in sizes 6 and 8 are most effective in the cool water. White flies and flies tied using white materials in combination with silver are good choices. A white marabou streamer with silver Flashabou mixed into the wing or a white woolly bugger ribbed with silver tinsel are effective. Flies need to be fished slowly in

early spring, and it's important to remember that bass that are moving shallow for the first time in months are very easily spooked. Shadows cast across their positions and sloppy casts will cause their immediate retreat to deeper water. Cast beyond the holding structure and retrieve slowly.

As the water warms into the 60's, bass will move onto the flats. Aggressive males, fueled by their competitive instincts to spawn, are less cautious. Larger flies that create more of a disturbance are in order. Surface flies in sizes 1 through 6 can produce exciting action. Poppers and floater/divers in bright colors that are easily seen by the angler or frog patterns make bassing a visually stimulating game. The bass may well prefer an aggressively retrieved fly during this period but the prudent approach is to start slowly and let the bass dictate any increase in tempo.

With 70-degree water temperatures, spawning activity diminishes and sunlight penetration replaces procreation as the factor that governs bass locations. Bright sunlit skies cause the bass to move deeper or to shady locations. Slowly retrieved wet flies in darker colors that probe the weedline, deadfall branches, humps, and riprap areas are best. Leech, worm, and crayfish patterns that utilize lifelike materials such as rabbit strips or rubber hackles can be the ticket to success. The low light periods of early morning and late evening or heavily overcast skies allow the bass to move shallower. Surface fishing or shallow retrieves of streamers near the edges of weedbeds and deadfalls can trigger some explosive strikes.

In ponds, bluegills occupy the same structure as bass but are stimulated to move into the shallows later in spring. Although catchable when water temperatures are in the 50's, they will occupy the deeper portions of structure. Sixty-degree water will bring bluegills to the edges of the flats to begin fueling for the spawning process. Slowly retrieved flies in fluorescent chartreuse or fluorescent pink/red are highly visible to shallow bluegills. For a more natural approach, lightly weighted Pheasant Tail or Prince Nymphs retrieved with gentle liftings of the rod tip and strips only to remove slack line can deliver fast action. Slightly weighted flies sink in a more natural manner and those in sizes 8 through 14 will be more suitable for the bluegills' tiny mouths. Inlet creeks and the back ends of dark-bottomed coves deserve the first casts.

As the water temperatures elevate into the upper 60's and lower 70's bluegills will flood the flats to occupy colonies of shallow nests that may appear as light-colored depressions on the bottom. The brightly colored male bluegills are so competitive and territorial that virtually any cast that hits the water can bring a strike. Size 8 to 10 poppers can be excellent, but wet flies of appropriate size also work well. Color selection isn't usually critical during the spawn, but light colors in clear water and dark colors that provide a stark silhouette in murky water are most visible to the fish and are therefore more productive. It's wise to remember that the largest fish spawn in the center of the large colony of nests, but casting directly over the outer ring of beds is likely to frighten the entire population. Initial casts should be made to the outer edges of the nests. Hooking and playing a fish among the others furthers their excitement and subsequent



casts can then be made progressively toward the beds of the largest bluegills.

As water temperatures rise into the mid-70's and beyond, sunlight penetration determines fish location and fly color selection. Wood structure is a key location for post-spawn bluegills. A small dock or deadfall provides the overhead cover necessary to block sunlight, provide security and become a feeding magnet. Flies that fall slowly and vertically into the bluegills' lair without manipulation are best. We have created our own vertical-drop flies for warmwater fly fishing, such as Bully's Bluegill Spider that's tied with a chenille body that covers a 0.020 lead wire base and round rubber hackle legs, but another fly that works well on the drop is a size-12 bead-head Woolly Bugger with a marabou tail.

By identifying the qualities of productive nearby ponds, paying attention to springtime water temperatures, targeting the seasonally used structure for each species, and choosing the right size and type of fly, long rodders can find exciting action near home. Deciding whether to fish for chunky largemouths or feisty bluegills, well. . . that's the hard part.

END

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