

SIX STEPS TO BETTER BASS FISHING IN MUDDY WATER

When clear lakes and ponds become swollen from downpours and suddenly acquire the color of cappuccino, the prospects for catching largemouth bass can appear to be pretty dismal. Indeed, casting the same flies to the same places and employing the same retrieves will likely bring discouraging results not because the bass have disappeared or quit feeding but because they may not be able to locate the angler's offering.

Those bass that are accustomed to relatively clear water have learned to feed primarily by visual means. Bass that live in normally dingy or turbid waters, on the other hand, locate their prey by sound. In other words, all fish are captives of their environment and are forced to adapt to whatever conditions occur.

Unfortunately for anglers no two of these piscatorial homelands are quite the same. That means that each waterway must be evaluated independently in terms of water clarity by comparing its present condition to what is normal for that body of water. The two muddied conditions, one permanent, the other temporary, require very different fishing solutions.

For permanently darkened water the presentation solution is the creation of sound. Flies, whether topwater, mid-depth or bottom-bouncers, must be chosen to create vibrations that enable bass to utilize their lateral line, which functions a bit like a sonar unit, to locate the angler's imitation. For clearer waters that have been muddied, the visually oriented bass population must be approached very differently.

Many years ago we regularly fished a 37-acre water supply lake that was loaded with largemouth bass. Although clouded by suspended nutrients its water was normally clear enough for visibility to a depth of four feet. Near the dam the water depth exceeded 30 feet, and it grew progressively more shallow toward the creek that had been dammed to create it. The stream drained agricultural croplands and tiny intermittent rivulets that emanated from pasturelands fed two coves. Rains affected the water clarity quickly and sometimes for several weeks. We avoided fishing there after rains until a long-planned trip by a visiting fisherman forced us to deal with the muddy conditions. That weekend we eventually caught over 30 bass. Two were 4 lbs. and one exceptional catch tipped our hand-held scales at 6-1/2 lbs. It was an eye-opening experience that was instrumental in the formation of our stained-water strategies. Eventually we were able to identify six steps that had helped tilt the odds in our favor that day when the water looked unfishable. Here's our six-step muddy water plan:





1. Avoid fishing the area most affected by the inlet creek that is the main source of the silt. The bottom in this area is made up of soft silt from years of similar events. Structure, such as humps, depressions, and submerged stumps, has largely been covered by soft mud and this portion of the pond or lake has become a “fish bowl.” For fly-fishers this is not an altogether bad thing because with underwater structure erased, what you see is what you get. The visible weedline, deadfalls, rocks and others are the only structure available to the bass. But during the influx of silt, the visibility is too poor for flies to be seen there. Move past this area and focus further toward the lake or pond’s basin.

2. If fishing the day immediately following the deluge, fish the dam area and main lake points where the siltation process hasn’t yet affected water clarity so severely. The slightly clearer conditions especially in smaller waters will attract the fish that have been negatively impacted by the muddy conditions. The least affected area will

have a larger concentration of bass and they will tend to feed more competitively. This is especially true for school bass in the 12- to 15-inch length size range. Check the visibility in the water by lowering a brightly colored fly (fluorescent chartreuse, for example) into the water to determine the maximum depth at which it is visible. Repeat this process in various locations to determine where the greatest visibility occurs and concentrate fishing efforts there. Often this will be the inside edge of main lake or pond points and deeper sections of bluff areas in the main lake basin.

3. Target wood structure with short, accurate casts using weedless flies. When bass are disturbed or threatened they instinctively seek the protection of overhead cover. A dock or deadfall provides great security as well as a place where moss clings to the branches, which attracts insect larva, minnows, and crustaceans on which the bass can feed. Anglers can approach more closely during this time of darkened water because the bass are less able to see them. Accuracy is necessary to put the fly right in the thickest cover yet maintain tight line contact to facilitate strike detection and a positive hook set. Weedless flies will also enable the fly-fisher to make contact with the wood by intentionally changing the direction of the retrieve. This structure-bumping retrieve will alert the



bass to the potential meal in his bailiwick. Numerous monofilament weedguard arrangements can be successful in preventing unwanted hookups, but recently we have come to rely on a clear plastic product called "Stick-Guard." It has a slot in the plastic that slides over the hook eye and the other end is pushed into the hook point making the fly as weedless as the bait-caster's plastic worm. If you are unable to find Stick-Guard at your local tackle shop buy clear plastic worms and make your own. In either case they are more successful in preventing snags than any other weedguard we've used.

4. Tie or purchase bulkier flies capable of creating a more visible silhouette as well as displacing more water, thereby creating more vibrations that enable feeding bass to locate them easier. Years ago while fishing the ultra-clear waters of Lake Superior we learned the importance of sparsely tied flies from a grizzled veteran fly caster from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Just as flies tied with a minimum of materials are the solution in gin clear waters the opposite is more effective when the water is murky. Heavily tied Clousers with epoxy or E Z Shape Sparkle Body heads are good choices. The substantial heads allow the structure bumping change of direction retrieve to bang into the wood structure to create needed noise as well as stand up to the constant pounding without destroying the fly.

5. Fish dark-colored flies, such as black or purple, so that the silhouette of the fly is contrasted sharply as the bass views it against the sky's lighter background. A bass's eyes are located on the top of its head, which makes it much easier to ambush its meal from below. A black popper is easily seen by the bass from the stained water below even on the darkest overcast days. But that dark surface fly is difficult for the fisherman to see against the dark water, which further underscores the importance of making short accurate casts close to the densest structure. Even heavily weighted bottom-bouncing flies in dark colors are effective. Jig-type weedless flies have the action and stark silhouettes to entice bass that are trying to overcome their mud-imposed hunger strike.

6. Cast fluorescent-colored flies that incorporate highly reflective materials like Krystal Flash in the shallows when sunlight is intense. Fluorescent chartreuse floater/divers are perfect for this situation as sunlight accentuates the fly's visibility while the fly being constantly pulled under then floating back to the surface creates an attention-grabbing commotion. If the darkened water conditions have existed for several days it's entirely possible that the bass have had little to eat during that time. Under those circumstances they will move shallow even under intense sunlight in search of food protected from the blinding rays of the sun by the muddy water. Using a noisy, light-reflective fly with the fly caster hidden from the bass's view can often produce a surface-fishing jackpot.

Rain and the resulting runoff is the necessary lifeblood of our lakes and ponds with siltation as the unfortunate byproduct. Too often the condition causes the cancellation of fishing trips. But there's no reason to cancel your plans or use the stained water as an excuse. Moving away from the darkest water near the inlet creek and toward the down-lake clearer waters to target wood structure with short, accurate casts will locate catchable fish. Temporarily muddied waters may provide outstanding bass fishing if you

use weedless flies capable of structure-bumping, heavily dressed flies in dark colors on overcast days, and fluorescent colors on days of bright sunlight

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