

Mullets: Not just for tempting saltwater fish

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

The concentric ripples barely moved away from the float after it plopped next to a log protruding from matted vegetation before it disappeared almost as if someone threw a rock into the river.

“That didn’t take long,” reacted Steve Niemoeller as he set the hook on a 5-pound bass. “I’ve never fished for bass with mullets before, but I had some left over from a saltwater trip and decided to use them.”

Most bass anglers use artificial baits, but a largemouth might gulp anything it can stuff into its cavernous mouth. Some anglers prefer to tempt bass with live shiners, threadfin shad or even shrimp. Many anglers use live mullets about four to eight inches long when fishing for big redfish and other salty species. In coastal waters, bass and redfish regularly hunt the same prey.

“A bass eats the same thing as a redfish,” Niemoeller explained. “I’m sure bass eat mullets in the wild. The first time I tried a mullet for largemouths, the bass took the bait as soon as it hit the water. Maybe bass hit mullets quicker because I offered them something different or mullets struggle a little differently. Whatever, they work great!”

Mullets populate most coastal Alabama waters and thrive in brackish estuaries like Mobile-Tensas Delta. They commonly venture as far inland as the Tombigbee and Alabama rivers. Mullet provide abundant forage for many species living in rivers like the Perdido, Conecuh or Choctawhatchee that flow into salt water. In fertile estuaries, juvenile mullets often gather in huge schools so anglers can usually sometimes catch a bunch of free bait quickly. Hardy mullets can live in foul water and typically stay alive longer than shad in a livewell.

“I’ve caught as many as four dozen mullets in a few throws with a cast

net,” Niemoeller recalled. “If I come back from a saltwater trip with some mullets in the livewell, I’ll keep them for the next bass trip.”

Bass anglers can fish mullets in the same way they might want to tempt redfish or big speckled trout. Dangle live mullets under floats placed close to weed beds, fallen logs, stumps, shoreline drop-offs, tributary mouths or other cover and wait for them to disappear.

“I fish mullets about two to three feet under a float,” Niemoeller advised. “I use three- to six-inch long mullets hooked through the lips or through the back under the dorsal fin with a 2/0 or 3/0 weedless hook. Mullet are slim so bass can swallow them quicker than some other live baits.”

Frequently, anglers see their floats heading rapidly toward thick weeds, logs or other cover. That usually means a mullet with a hungry bass hot on its tail wants to hide before it becomes breakfast. Sometimes, mullets rise to the surface in an escape attempt and bass blast them as they would a topwater lure.

For deeper presentations, free line live mullets without adding weights. Anglers can also fish them on Carolina rigs. Rig several rods in different ways and toss them next to cover with easy access to deep water and shallow feeding flats. Place some baits shallow and some deep to see what fish prefer that day. Then, wait for the squirming baitfish to attract attention.

Whether fishing with a float, free line or a Carolina rig, don’t react too hastily after a bass takes a live bait. Bass habitually hit baitfish first to wound or kill them. Then, they return to slurp their meal. In addition, predators need time to reposition baitfish in their mouths so they can swallow them head first with the fins folded. If swallowed tail first, extended fins could lodge in a fish’s throat and choke it.



Photo by John N. Felsher

Steve Niemoeller shows off a bass he caught while fishing with a live mullet.