

HUNTING FOR BASS

In the spring, many anglers look for big fish on the beds

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

Various sunfish, small bass and other creatures flashed through the clear, shallow water fleeing our approach, but they didn't interest us as we moved slowly down the riverbank.

We scrutinized each patch of light-colored sand, intently looking for dark, oblong objects hovering near the bottom. Then, we spotted our quarry, a giant bass accompanied by a smaller male occupying an oval-shaped depression on the bottom.

"There she is! That's one big bass," proclaimed Shaw Grigsby, a professional bass angler. "She's at least double digits with a male of about four pounds next to her. Get ready."

When water warms sufficiently in the spring, male bass scour out saucer-shaped depressions about 20 to 30 inches in diameter by using their lower jaws as pivot points and rotating themselves with their tails. Females typically arrive about two to three weeks later. After spawning, females go about their business while males guard the eggs and fry developing in their nests.

After about eight to 10 days, the eggs hatch. When the fry reach about a half-inch long, the male chases them off the nest by eating a few of his own offspring. Then, the male might look for another female to repeat the process. A male bass might spawn with several females and remain on the nest for weeks.

For many people, the spring spawn also means "sight fishing" season. Anglers frequently spot and catch huge fish on shallow beds, but before they can catch bucketmouths, they need to find them.

"Sight fishing is like hunting," Grigsby explained. "The challenge is finding the fish. Once we find them, we can often get them to bite. Bass on the beds don't feed. They grab baits instinctively to protect their eggs and fry."

While on the beds, male bass eat very little, but they vigorously defend their nests against a multitude of predators that not only want to eat the eggs and fry, but the parents. They'll attack

Todd Kersey shows off a largemouth bass he caught on a soft-plastic fluke-type bait, an excellent choice when sight-fishing for bass.



Photo by John N. Felsher

anything that poses a potential threat to the nest and periodically remove debris with their mouths.

Salamanders and crawfish rank among the worst nest raiders. Bass frequently kill them to protect their eggs even when not actively feeding. Therefore, jigs, tubes and lizards that imitate salamanders, crawfish or other creatures work extremely well on bedding bass. Some people might throw a plastic bait at one specific lunker for hours before it hits a lure or spooks.

"Most people get too close to the fish," advised Terry Scroggins, a professional bass angler. "If anglers can see the fish, the fish can see them. In clear water, fish may spook so I back away and make long casts. Sometimes, I mark the bed with a tomato stake and come back to it."

Scroggins typically tosses a finesse worm, craw or other temptation behind the nest and drags the bait into the bed. He leaves it motionless for long periods, occasionally giving it a little shake. Even with no apparent action, a craw worm or similar bait twitches and undulates slightly with water movement. Just that bit of subtle action

could provoke a strike.

Bluegills and crappie also eat large quantities of tiny bass. Crankbaits, spinnerbaits or swimbaits that resemble these fish could provoke bass strikes in the spring. Also, crawfish-colored crankbaits work extremely well during spawning season.

After catching a bass on the beds, release it quickly, especially a big female loaded with roe. One female might produce many thousands of offspring in her lifetime. One of them could grow into the largest bass you'll ever catch so let her go as soon as possible so she can get back to her spawning. Also, when an angler removes a male bass from the nest, predators move in to eat the eggs and fry.

Anglers typically need relatively clear water to sight-fish for bass. In southern Alabama, anglers don't usually see much clear water outside of Big Creek Lake or Millers Ferry Reservoir.