

Early Winter Bass Fishing

BY PARKER FREW

As the leaves start to change and the air begins to cool, anglers all around switch their mindsets about bass fishing. A lot of anglers will slowly recede back into camo and start their descent into the deer stands in hopes of bagging the first deer of the year. While some anglers slowly transition back to the hunting camp, others begin to truly get excited about the months to come. Fall bass fishing can be absolutely phenomenal all the way into the early winter months. Bass will also begin to transition just as hunters do. Colder weather and shorter days signal a feeding frenzy is on the way. While the boat ramp may appear thin compared to just weeks earlier, don't be fooled. This can mean the whole lake is all yours and they are biting everywhere.

Stay on top of them

To me this can be one of the most important aspects of this time of year. I love running down the lake on the first cold morning with a north wind and thinking the bass should be right on the bank feeding everywhere. More times than not, this is not the case. One thing I try to tell myself day in and day out is that a bass does not have the internet. He doesn't know that in 14 days there is a random cold front headed in during the first part of October. All a bass knows is that it has been a long hot summer, and he is still worn out. Bass will remain in their summer homes until the water temperatures truly begin to fall. I tend to follow this rule strongly when I am targeting larger fish. There will always be "bank runners," as I call them, that live in shallow water 365 days a year.

While these fish can prove to be very predictable and fun to catch, they are not the biggest fish in the lake. A large fish needs to have optimum water temperatures that hold an adequate amount of oxygen to survive. I see a lot of people that shy away this time of year because they believe that fishing has gotten really tough. In a way that is true if you are not where the fish are. Finding the exact location and stage that bass are in is crucial this time of year. Be ready for them to make their move shallow, but know that it may take a little longer than you believe.

Change your presentation

Summer tends to push us towards using slow moving methodical baits that will trigger a big lazy lethargic bass into biting. While this is pure dynamite during the summer, it may not be the best choice as winter approaches. Fish will begin to focus intensively on bait fish

this time of year. Shad will begin to push shallow as the nights get longer and the water cools. Bass will slowly be more willing to chase a bait a longer distance than they would just weeks before. Baits such as a crankbait, spinnerbait, lipless crankbait or a topwater really begin to shine during this period. These will offer the image of a bait fish while also making key moves that will trigger them into biting. Most of these baits can be fished from 20 feet deep all the way to just 1 or 2 feet deep with slight variations. Another thing that is very critical about the lineup of baits is the ability to cover a lot of water. Moving baits allows you to locate a school of fish much faster than slowly probing with others.

Be ready for changes in the water

Just as fast as fall fish can turn on, they can turn off. Around December to January you will generally see the fall pattern dwindle away. A large storm system such as a major cold front during this time of year can really change things up. As the water begins to get below 55 degrees, bass will become once again very lethargic and slow down. This is when you will need to change your approach when it comes to your bait choice and your retrieve. Fish will begin to suspend in columns of the water that tend to suit them best. In the south this section of water tends to be around 5-8 feet in most lakes. Just deep enough to avoid drastic changes in water temperature, but shallow enough to still be able to absorb the warm sunlight. This is when baits such as a jerk bait or a flat sided crankbait really begin to shine. The jerk bait can be worked slow enough to entice a strike while still maintaining the baitfish profile. When it comes to the flat sided crankbait, what makes this bait work so well is the thin profile that allows it to have a really subtle tight action. When the bass get cold, so do the baitfish. Small baitfish such as shad begin to be very slow with their moves. You will quit seeing huge schools of shad on the bank frantically running from their predators. Slowing your retrieve and making key stops or twitches are now more important than ever.

All in all, fall and winter can be some of the best days of your life when it comes to bass fishing if you approach it the right way. Slow down just a little before you head to the base of the tree or to the duck blind and utilize the patterns of a fall feeding frenzy on the lake. Keep the bass located, tie on your favorite spinnerbait, be aware of the subtle changes and you will absolutely forget about that big deer on camera. These are the days where your dream of that huge fish can come true all without the sweat and sunburn of the summer.

