

Underwater Tactics: finding bass spawning areas

by Ken_Cook

The weather outside your house may still be frightful and probably the last thing on your mind right now is sitting in an open-air bass boat on the water. But if you're anything like me, bass fishing is never too far from your mind. With 11 (and hopefully more) tournaments coming up this year, I have to plan far in advance for what I am going to do once the competition begins. For those of you who don't compete in tournaments, most likely the first thing you'll begin to game plan for is fishing the spawn. Ken Cook is the 1991 Bassmaster Classic champion and a 14-time Classic qualifier. A former fisheries biologist, Cook lives on a ranch in Meers, Oklahoma. Fishing for spawning or bedding fish is challenging and a lot of fun because it requires certain skills that anglers don't have to use very often. Plus, the chance is always there that you can hook into some really big fish. But the key to catching these huge spawning bass is finding them. There might be hundreds or thousands of surface areas of water in your favorite fishery, so knowing where to start the search will help you make the most of your time on the water and increase your chances of landing more and bigger fish. Bass might be found in anywhere from 4 to 40 feet of water during varying times of the year, but once the water temperature reaches a certain point, in most cases they'll be coming shallow (shallow water warms more quickly than deeper water) to begin reproducing. They'll take up temporary residence in areas referred to as spawning flats and begin with making beds and waiting for just the right water temperature and conditions to happen so that the females can lay their eggs to be fertilized by the males. A spawning flat can be the top of a stump in 30 feet of water, or a 40-acre grass bed. It is relative to the type of impoundment involved. If there are a lot of flat areas of the lake, then you must key on particular types of bottom, or vegetation to give you the clue as to where the bass will actually spawn. In upland-type lakes with little flat bottom areas, then whatever is available along the protected shoreline is going to support spawning bass. Bass need spawning areas that are protected from nest-disturbing prevailing winds by the shoreline definition, grass beds or features from prevailing winds. Once you've keyed in on these areas, you can begin to look for actual beds and the bass that inhabit them. In my experiences, I simply look for a shiny or bright spot with a shadow over it. The shiny spot is the bedding area. Big bass will find a place to hang out and then proceed to fan the area clear of algae and debris. This produces the shiny spot; the fish produces the shadow lingering over the bed. Spotting the fish any other way is very difficult because bass have evolved in such a way that the tops of their bodies take on the color of their environment enabling them to stalk their prey more effectively. If the water is reasonably clear and the wind is low enough that I can see the bottom through the water, I look for hard-bottomed coves, a place where the bottom will be mostly pea gravel and chunk rock. Once there, I get on the deck of my boat and watch for the mostly round nests, areas that have been cleared off by bass fanning their tails. Once I spot a nest, I either look for a bass or its shadow. Once I spot the fish -- be it a small male or a large female -- I use my spinning reel, spooled with 10-pound Vanish (especially if the fish have already been pressured), and cast a white, Texas-rigged 4-inch Berkley PowerBait Power Flippin' Tube, with the hook barely piercing the skin of the bait. I position my boat far enough away from the nest so as to not spook the bass, but close enough that I can still see what is going on. After casting just beyond the nest (if the fish hasn't already gone for the bait), I hop the tube into the nest, working it through the nest area searching for the "sweet spot." The sweet spot -- for some unknown reason -- is an area of the nest that, when a bait reaches it, will cause the fish to attack. It may take several minutes or several hours to get the bass to react, but when it does, it will turn itself sideways and scoop the bait off the bottom in an effort to remove the intruder from the nest - not always to eat it. Because the hook is barely in the bait, it will be easier to set the hook. If the first approach doesn't work, I like to turn to a dark colored Berkley Gulp! Lizard and try the same tactics. However, unlike the white tube, the dark lizard is harder to see in the water. If the water is too murky to see the nests, try Carolina rigging in the shallows. And if you're after smallmouth bass, look for underwater cover to hold bedding fish. Fishing the spawn can be fun, difficult and rewarding all at the same time. By knowing where to start your search and developing the skills you'll need to catch them, you can focus your efforts and experience some of the best big-bas fishing opportunities of the year.