

On the Water: Dissecting docks

by Larry_Nixon

When fishing a tournament or just for fun at any of the great fisheries we have across the nation, there's undoubtedly more than one way to catch some fish. With that many fish and that many surface acres of water, it's not uncommon to see two different people have great fishing days while doing completely different things. Some people like to cover a lot of water and rush from spot to spot, but I prefer to pick a couple of different areas to target and focus my efforts there. Larry Nixon is a former Bassmaster Classic champion with more than \$1.5 million in career earnings on the BASS Tour. Now fishing the FLW Tour, Nixon lives in Bee Branch, Ark. More and more homes are being built on lakes around the country, and one of the first things that the new homeowners do once they've built their home on the lake is build a dock. These docks aren't just for tying up boats - they make for great fishing. A lot of tournament money has been won fishing docks over the years and yet it's still an underrated pattern for too many anglers. But hopefully, by knowing how to fish a dock thoroughly and effectively, you can have more success when fishing docks. Docks are vital fish habitats because they address the basic needs: food and shelter. Especially on wooden docks and pilings, algae growth draws in small baitfish like shad. These shad will feed on the vegetation that clings to the docks and pilings, and - in turn - draw in predatory bass looking for an easy meal. Also, these docks draw in smaller fish like the baitfish and bluegill, which hover around docks to avoid predation. When the sun is high and the water is warm, bass also like to shade themselves under and around boat docks. Also, a lot of times, people who own boat docks or have them near their lake homes will sink brush piles nearby to hold crappie. These brush piles can also hold a lot of bass. I normally stay away from floating docks, since they don't have pilings, but any stationary dock - especially wooden ones - can be a potential honey hole. An important part of knowing whether the dock fishing is going to stay consistent, say throughout a tournament, is the water level. Sometimes, docks may only have a few feet of water under them. If the lake is dropped six inches during the week, the pattern probably won't hold. But if the docks are in deeper water, you can be reasonably certain that lakes levels won't affect the fishing there. Docks are pretty much an effective location anytime except the dead of winter. Once the water temperature gets higher than 50 degrees, try looking for bass there. There's two ways to fish a dock: flipping and skipping. There are a lot of great flippers these days and it's a great way to catch fish. I use an Abu Garcia REVO STX spooled with 25-pound Berkley Big Game line to flip baits like PowerBait Chigger Craws and Classic Jigs. Usually in pre-spawn months, mid-day, once the water has warmed up, I can flip the shade side of these docks and trigger a reaction strike from the bass. I try to use colors and patterns of baits that match the bluegill or shad in the area and use a heavy weight. The heavy weight is helpful if there's any wind, plus it makes the bait fall faster - a must when going for a reaction bite.

Skipping can be even more effective for fishing docks because it allows you to get much further underneath the dock than you can with flipping. For skipping, I prefer an Abu Garcia spinning reel spooled with Trilene Maxx, because it's sensitive enough to detect strikes but tough enough to use around structure like docks. I use a Cardinal spinning reel on a medium-heavy to medium-light rod, what I call 70/30 - 70 percent backbone and 30 percent tip - to get the right kind of skip. It has to give a little. The cast is like a checked swing in baseball. You stop by pointing your rod's tip at your target. The bait goes out there like it was shot from a gun. Lifting the rod tip is the key. After you sling it and just before the bait hits the water, you have to raise the rod. Just like flipping, it takes practice, but once you start skipping Texas-rigged Gulp! Sinking Minnows or Jerk Shads that far under the dock - especially in the hot part of the year - you will wonder why you didn't start doing it earlier. Docks can hold a lot of fish, but knowing why the fish are there and what they're looking for will put you a long way towards catching more and bigger bass.

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