

Underwater Tactics: Bass and deep-water ledges

by Ken_Cook

It's not unusual for people to equate bass fishing with the shallow-water flipping and pitching that goes on so many places throughout the country. True, largemouth bass, when they inhabit structure-filled water sheds, will be found regularly around the bank, near blown-down trees, hydrilla, lily pads and other places that provide them outstanding places to both forage and hide. But these types of fisheries haven't exactly cornered the bass fishing market. In fact, largemouth bass inhabit all manner of water across this country, from creeks and rivers to pothole-shaped farm ponds and enormous natural lakes. This time of year through fall, one of my favorite types of fisheries for largemouth bass is a highland reservoir like the ones found across parts of middle America. These lakes, because of their depth, are short on standing and laying timber, but have plenty of deep-water ledges that continually hold bass. Typified by a cavernous river channel, steep rock banks, clear water and a lack of shallow weeds and wood, many highland reservoirs are subjected to a significant seasonal drawdown beginning in fall and lasting through midwinter. Their thermocline is often amazingly deep -- 45 feet at times is not unheard of. They're almost total absence of shallow cover means largemouths (as well as smallmouth and spotted bass) living in these impoundments use deep-water structure like ledges to their advantage. Bass prowl these short outcroppings or "stairsteps" for crawfish and will remain in the area even when not actively feeding. The first step to catching bass on deep-water ledges is to locate a ledge on which to fish. The best place to start looking for ledges is to look for sloping rock banks. These banks, as the bank descends through the lake, will have slight outcroppings at all depths throughout the water column. Generally, gentler-sloping banks will lead to more ledges. Once you've found a ledge to fish, there are multiple options for covering these areas. One of my favorite ways is with a spinnerbait. Spinnerbaits are great around shallow structure, but a big, heavy, tandem-blade spinnerbait can do the trick in deep water, too. Since the spinnerbait covers a lot of water once it gets down there, I prefer to back my boat away from the ledge and cast parallel to it from a medium distance. I allow the bait to sink to the ledge (or past it if I cast beyond the ledge) and begin my slow roll. By keeping my boat positioned away from the end of the ledge, I allow my spinnerbait to remain close to the ledge for a longer period of time before it begins its ascent towards the water's surface. And by casting parallel to the ledge, I run less of a risk of pulling the bait away from bass that are holding tightly to the ledge. For a spinnerbait set up like this, I like a 1-ounce, tandem willow leaf blade spinner on 20-pound Berkley Trilene 100% Fluorocarbon line spooled on an Abu Garcia REVO Premier. Rod selection has been made even easier with the new Elite Tech rods from Fenwick. They make a 6-foot-10-inch medium-action Target/Spinnerbait rod that is perfect for this application. Just fish the bait along these ledges and let the fish tell you what speed you should use for the retrieve and any bait and skirt color combinations you should use. Chartreuse and white are great colors to start with. If the bass don't respond to the spinnerbait, it might be time for a Carolina rig. The Carolina rig is perfect for covering a lot of water thoroughly but without taking a lot of time. Using a 20-pound Berkley Trilene MAXX line, I rig my Carolina rig with a $\frac{3}{4}$ - or 1-ounce cylindrical tungsten sinker (depending on the depth of the ledge - the deeper the ledge, the bigger weight I use). Leader lengths can vary depending on fish behavior, but I generally keep it in the 24-30 inch range. On a 3/0 wide-gap hook, I will use a Berkley PowerBait 6-inch Power Lizard or a 3-inch PowerBait Beast. Stick with the Green Pumpkin and Pumpkinseed colors with this application since those are the best imitators of a crawfish. Using the same boat position, cast the Carolina rig on to the ledge and move the weight deliberately back towards me, shaking the tip of the Fenwick Elite Tech Riggins' Stick (a 7-foot medium-heavy casting rod with a fast tip) from time to time and feeling for strikes. When your next fishing trip takes you to a lake where there's no structure to pitch or flip, there's a good chance you can still find plenty of fish hanging out along edges. Whether it's with a spinnerbait, a Carolina rig or even a crankbait, these are great places to start looking for fish this time of year. Ken Cook is the 1991 Bassmaster Classic Champion and a 14-time Classic qualifier. A former fisheries biologist, Cook lives on his ranch in Meers, Okla.