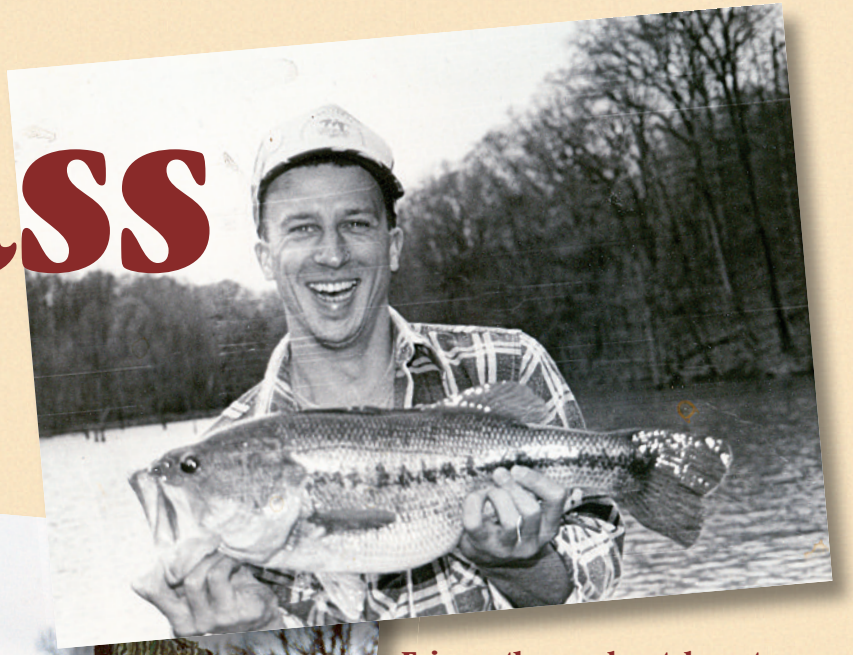
Somewhere between winter and spring, bass anglers hunt for what could be their biggest catch of the year.

Why March is Big Bass Month



Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

All fishermen keep secrets. And sometimes they're big secrets. For serious largemouth bass anglers, the month of March just might be the biggest and best-kept secret of all.

Here's a clue: Ever wonder why those seemingly crazy die-hards are casting away on the lake on a miserable March afternoon? Maybe you've dismissed them as bored anglers with nothing better to do? The fact is, many of those dedicated fishermen are actually harboring a cold secret: March is one of the best times of the year to hook a huge bass, thanks to a biological fact of nature. A few weeks prior to the spawning season, largemouth bass—including those whoppers people love to brag about—become increasingly hungry as they fatten up for the annual ritual of reproduction.

(Photo by Ron Kruger.)

Once spawning gets under way a few weeks later, about the time when warm, sunny days draw fair-weather fishermen to the lake, bass actually shun opportunities to feed. At the same time, those same bass will expend a tremendous amount of stored-up energy to produce and protect their offspring.

"Spawning is energetically taxing," explained Illinois Natural History Survey fisheries biologist David Wahl. The weeks prior to laying eggs and guarding the nest are actively spent devouring calories as bass "wake up" from a cold winter of relative inactivity.

"They're starting to move around, preparing for spawning, putting on weight," Wahl said. "They also begin to move into shallower water to take advantage of the sun-warmed water near the shore, and that makes them more accessible to bank fishermen."

"Generally, that's when they're starting to put on the feed bag," laughed DNR fisheries biologist Mike Mounce, a largemouth bass authority who's studied bass behavior and ecology in Illinois for more than 19 years. "The same behavior occurs in the fall when bass are fattening up for winter. A lot of fishermen tend to miss out on that action because most of them are out hunting."

Fair-weather anglers take note: Some of the best bass-fishing opportunities of the year occur when the weather is chilly or downright cold.

For early spring bass anglers, the action begins to heat up in southern Illinois in early March, a few weeks later in the north. Egg-laden females will soon weigh in at their heaviest of the season; meanwhile, males chow down to put on weight for their nest-building and guarding of the young. (A common myth about male bass is that their duties are relatively minor during spawning season. The fact is, male bass are the ones who physically scrape and fan out suitable "beds" for the female, and are usually the sole guardians of the tiny fry after the eggs hatch.) Neither males or females spend much time eating during spawning season itself, as anyone who's ever cast a plastic worm near a bass bed can attest.

So what's the best technique and gear to take advantage of the opportunities many anglers miss? Mounce pointed out that, while bass are becoming more active as the water warms to around 50 degrees, they're still not as lightning-quick as they will be during summer. Therefore, a slower presentation can entice bass to strike.

"A lot of pre-spawn bass fishermen favor the jig and pig," Mounce suggested. That popular, slow-presentation bass lure consists of a large jig with rubber "tentacles," plus a strip of pork rind (the "pig") or scented plastic bait attached to the hook. Bass anglers should cast the blob-like contraption into timber snags, around beaver lodges or other likely structures where bass are attracted to the sun-heated waters.

Work the bait slowly, allowing it to nudge its way along the bottom and over structures (imagine an octopus crawling). A strike might be nothing more than a loss of tension on the line, or a very slight pull as the curious bass sucks up the bait.

Another popular March lure is any of the deep-diving "crankbaits," which are basically lures resembling small- to medium-size baitfish. Crankbaits that rattle (hollow lures with metal beads inside) announce their presence to March bass, and such lures—especially those cast into deep water near structure—can produce tremendous fish when retrieved slowly.

"Low and slow" is the battle cry of the March bass fisherman, meaning the best results come from slow presentations made offshore amid deep structure. For comparison, those bass-producing casts made along shallow shorelines in summer are typically far less productive in March.

Yet Mounce notes the March rules of engagement do change on breezy, sunny days as warm surface water is pushed ashore: Bass leave their winter depths to savor the warmth.

"They can actually warm themselves up that way," Mounce explained. "On the windy side of the lake, the wind is pushing that surface water over to one shore and bass and other fish will congregate there to take advantage of the temperature difference."

Those congregating fish will be hungry, of course, many of them stocking up on energy for the strenuous weeks ahead. And in those weeks ahead, as comfortable spring weather draws many anglers to the lake for the first time, one cold fact remains: The best chance to catch a fat bass was actually weeks earlier.

That time is now.

March lure choices for bass include deep-diving crankbaits—especially rattling crankbaits—as well as the popular, slow-retrieve jigs paired with an enticing trailer.