Why artificial spawning structures make for better bass fishing at Crab Orchard Lake.

Making Bass Beds

Crab Orchard Lake offered great largemouth bass fishing for generations of anglers. Before catch-and-release became popular, locals such as Carterville bass angler and tournament champion Fred Washburn (left) consistently took home a heavy stringer.

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Sometimes, having a great reputation can be a heavy burden. Take Crab Orchard Lake, for example, where largemouth bass anglers for generations understood they always had a good chance to lift a trophy bass from the waters of this National Wildlife Refuge impoundment in southern Illinois. Great bass fishing and Crab Orchard became synonymous shortly after this 7,000-acre monster lake was created in 1939.

Fishermen quickly realized the opportunity to bring home stringers of bass was nearly limitless. Within a few decades, major bass tournaments became a standard rite of spring there. Crab Orchard bass clubs were formed, with anglers competing to top the lake record of a 10.6-pound largemouth. As years passed, fishing techniques improved and year-round bass-fishing pressure ensued. No longer did anglers hunt for bass only when the fish were close to shore. Fish finders and the art of offshore structure fishing allowed bass fishermen to raise bass anywhere in the lake during any season.

And then something changed. It seemed the aging Crab Orchard Lake wasn't able to support all of the bass-fishing pressure anymore. Could it be that fishermen were simply too good?

"Back in the 40s and 50s, guys would put on a pair of chest waders and work the shoreline for bass," recalled Fred Washburn, a veteran Carterville bass angler. "If a guy had a boat, that was a rare thing. Today, everybody's got a boat. And with all of the available technology, we're a lot better predator. Bass have nowhere to hide."

Even with the widespread practice of catch and release, bass anglers themselves eventually came to understand the seemingly unlimited resource of the largemouth bass at Crab Orchard, was, in fact, limited.

Enter the Crab Orchard Lake Spawning Sanctuary. It's a 40-acre refuge-within-a-refuge that protects bass during the prime spawning months of April through June. It's essentially a no-fishing area, but with artificial spawn-

Fingerling bass reveal the results of a successful spawn in the protected area of Crab Orchard Lake.

ing beds to encourage optimal reproduction success.

Research by the Illinois Natural History Survey indicated what long had been suspected: Removing male bass—which guard newly hatched fry—significantly reduced survival of the young fish. Since bass anglers in a tournament might catch and hold for hours these guardians of young bass, spawning success and recruitment was being affected.

Tournament participants themselves decided they should back away.

"(The spawning sanctuary) was originally an idea brought to me by some local bass club members," explained Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist Chris Bickers, who credits the public for their willingness to improve a beloved resource. What's more, bass anglers themselves helped fund materials used in the construction of "spawning beds" within the sanctuary at Grassy Bay.

"Resource-enhancement fees collected at Crab Orchard bass tournaments paid for construction of the artificial spawning structures," Bickers pointed out. "And volunteers assisted with building and placing them."

The 50 spawning beds are concrete and gravel-filled structures modeled after beds used successfully for the past few years in Kentucky. The first ones were installed in Grassy Bay in 2006, and in early 2007, Bickers "dusted off" the beds with a portable water pump to make them more attractive to spawning bass.

"Anglers have been supportive of the sanctuary idea," Bickers noted, "especially when I report that our assessments have found that it produces young bass at a rate of two- to 13-fold over our "control" area that is not off-limits to spring fishing."

While creel and size limits are time-tested management strategies for any fishery, the spawning sanctuary at Crab Orchard helped tackle a site-specific issue: the complex dynamics of the fishery.

"Crab Orchard Lake is 'recruitment limited' with regard to largemouth bass," Bickers said. "That means, if left alone, the bass population won't produce enough young that recruit into the population to maintain it at a quality level."

Annual stocking of largemouth bass at the lake is intended to offset the marginal natural recruitment of new bass each year. But do stocked bass behave any differently compared with naturally spawned bass in their native waters? Anecdotal reports hint there could be a behavioral difference.

Washburn said he's witnessed a difference in bass behavior since stocked fish arrived to supplement the population.

Artificial "beds" installed in Crab Orchard Lake's Grassy Bay are attracting—and protecting—largemouth bass during crucial spawning months.

"I think right now the lake is in better shape than it has been in a long time," Washburn attested. "The fish are there. But you just can't seem to catch them the way you used to."

Coincidence? Perhaps. Either way, the increased production of wild bass at Crab Orchard is a win-win for both anglers and lake managers since the fishery might someday be less reliant on stocking efforts.

Of course, all of the attention on bass won't come at the expense of other aquatic wildlife.

"The (sanctuary) area provides uninterrupted spawning opportunities for other fish species and an area for various birds to feed," Bickers said, but he added, "Hopefully they won't feed on bass."