

# When Fishing's Tough, You Can Still Save The Day!



by Buck Perry, Education Editor

Part Two of Two

**I**n last month's issue of *Fishing Facts* (November, 1987) I stated I would try to project these articles in such a way as to tie together some basic fishing facts and, in so doing, help you come up with some answers to the conditions you may face.

When we met last we decided to fish four bodies of water. Two of them were natural lakes and two were man-made (reservoirs). In each case we hit them during a bad weather condition, and the fish movements were practically zero.

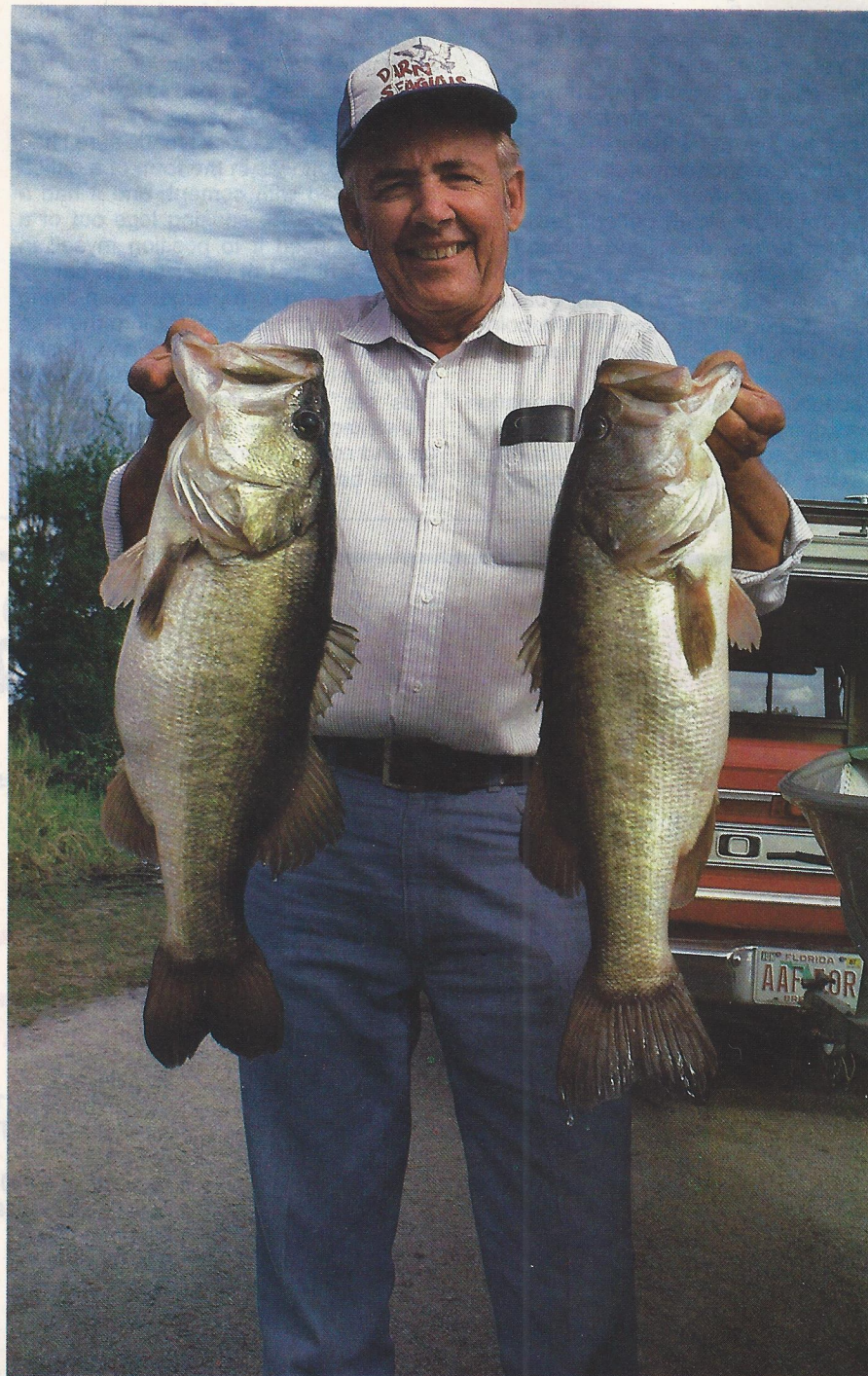
We had plenty of fishing gear, but due to a number of accidents we did not have a depth sounder. Neither of us had ever seen these lakes before — much less fished them. Since we could not stay long enough for conditions to improve, we decided to "straggler" fish them in the best manner. Our attempt was to straggler fish them in such a way as to catch you some fish, but at the same time learn something in the process. I believe you agreed that if we came off these lakes without increasing our knowledge or knowing what made each lake tick, the trip as a whole was lost regardless of how many fish we caught.

In every case we were unable to find a contour map of the lake. All we had to go on was the general condition of each. This we obtained by "looking" at the lakes before we went fishing.

Our attempt to get some useful information about the lake from the local people proved fruitless. It certainly wasn't like the time one hot, muggy day when I was crossing a bridge over a lake in the South. I had never fished this body of water before, and really had no plans to fish it at that time. But when I observed a small boat dock near the bridge, I decided to see if I could gather some information about the lake. I could see the water color was good for fishing, a red-sandy color. I could also see the makeup of the surrounding terrain, and it indicated there should be lots of good structure and deep water. However, answers to a few questions would be of help if I ever decided to fish this lake at some future date.

When I pulled up to the dock I didn't see anyone around, but I did see the door to a nearby shack was open. I went in and

*continued*



Florida Spoonplugger A.J. Barton has been a disciple of the legendary Buck Perry for years. As a result of following Buck's teachings, "Bart" catches lunkers like these on a fairly regular basis.



# When Fishing's Tough

found a guy sound asleep in a hammock. I beat on the wall until his eyes popped open. When he saw me he slowly pulled himself to a sitting position (never did get to his feet).

"Sorry to disturb your nap, but I was wondering if you could tell me anything about the lake?" I asked.

"What you wanna know?" he answered.

"How's fishing?"

"Hain't no good — too hot, nobody catching any," he responded.

"Are there any bass in this lake?"

"Yeh, plenty of 'em."

"Pardon me for asking, but how do you know there are bass in the lake if nobody is catching any?" I inquired.

"They caught some last spring."

"Where did they catch them?"

With that he slowly pulled himself up, strolled to the door, and pointed out across the lake — "See that shoreline over there between that big white oak and that patch of will'ers down on the point? They caught them along there," he yawned.

I could see this was all the information I was going to get, for with that he turned and headed back toward the hammock.

"Can I rent a boat and motor for

awhile?" I inquired.

"Help yourself," he said as he stretched out once again.

I went to the car, picked up my casting rod and a handful of large lures. I didn't change clothes and later I wished I had at least switched the white shirt and left off the tie.

I found one boat that must have been used recently, because it was the only one not half-full of rainwater. I could hardly believe my ears when the motor started on the third pull.

I threw the outboard motor in high gear and went the short distance to the area he had pointed out. Before I got there, the terrain showed me why fishermen had caught fish in that particular area. The shoreline indicated a good structure in the form of a ridgelike bar.

Before I left the dock I made sure I had an anchor. It was in the form of a gallon bucket filled with cement, and it had a rope suitable for snaking logs out of a swamp. I used it to position myself in about eight feet of water on the bar.

I then picked up my largest deep-diving lure and shot a cast as far into the lake as I could. I let the lure sink and, lo and behold, it had reached the drop-off. I was "jus' rite" on the first try.

I walked the lure quickly along bottom, up and over the breakline, and then on up the bar. The second cast was placed

a few feet to the right of the first cast. I let the lure sink, and the retrieve was as before. I placed the third cast a few feet to the right of the second cast. When the lure walked over the breakline (drop-off), a good bass took it. I didn't waste any time landing the fish and removing the hooks. Seven more casts to the area produced seven more fish the same size. I should say they weren't *exactly* the same size, as the smallest bass weighed 3 lbs. 14 oz., while the largest went 4 lbs. 3 oz. (weighed later at the dock).

When the eighth fish was in the boat I did not make another cast, but hurriedly raised that chunk of concrete and scooted back across to the dock. As the boat bumped the dock, ol' sleepyhead appeared in the door, running his fingers through his hair, and said, "What's wrong, did you fergit something?" When he glanced down and saw those eight flopping fish, he came out of that shed like the devil was after him.

To make a long story short, I took him over to the fishing spot and, after some effort of showing him how to make the cast (with several additional fish already hooked before I handed him the rod to make the retrieve, he caught his eighth fish (a limit catch). It was some show, for he had the "shakes" so bad I thought several times he was going to fall out of the boat.

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We "just had" to take those sixteen fish up to a small town that was nearby. He carried them right down the main drag, hollering all the way. The people poured out of the buildings as if they were all on fire. As I watched the scene I was reminded of the story of the Pied Piper.

Probably to this day he still thinks some sort of magic occurred that day, although I repeatedly told him nothing had been accomplished to warrant all the fuss. He never realized it, but actually HE HAD TOLD ME WHERE THE FISH WERE!

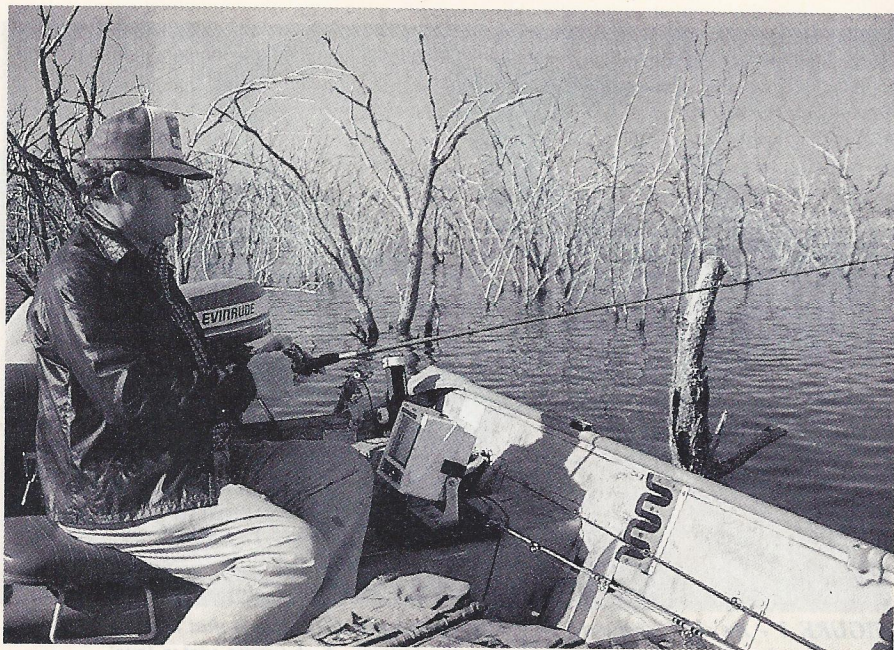
In the November, 1987 issue of *Fishing Facts* we discussed "straggler" fishing on two natural lakes. Now let us go on to those two man-made lakes. We had to straggler fish (catching a fish here and there) due to our not knowing anything

about the lakes, and due to the bad weather conditions which indicated there would be little or no movements of the fish that day.

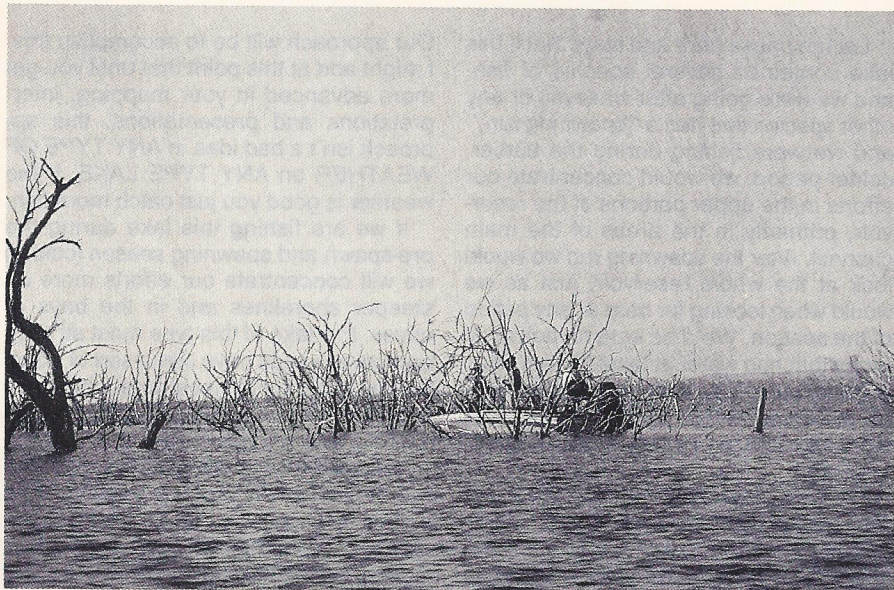
Remember now, we have two main things to accomplish when fishing these two reservoirs: (1) to get you some fish, and (2) to learn all we can about the lake. If we do not come off each lake with more fishing knowledge than when we started, our efforts are wasted. If we go about our straggler fishing in such a way as to learn all we can, have no fear, catching fish will take care of itself.

**Figure 1** is a top view of the first lake we are going to fish. It is an old "lowland"-type reservoir. It was built so long ago, there is not a trace of a bush, stump or

*continued*



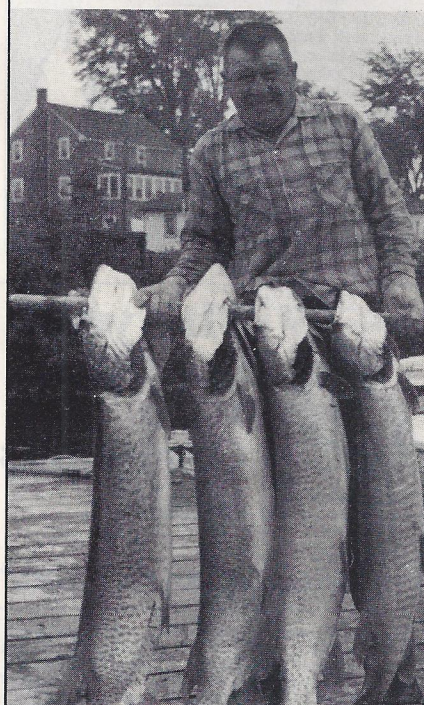
For best results fishermen should consider their "straggler fishing" in terms of both cold-water (pre-spawn, spawn) and warm-water conditions (post-spawn).



"My observations over the years have shown me that most fishermen are ALWAYS straggler fishing." - Buck Perry

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## When Fishing's Tough

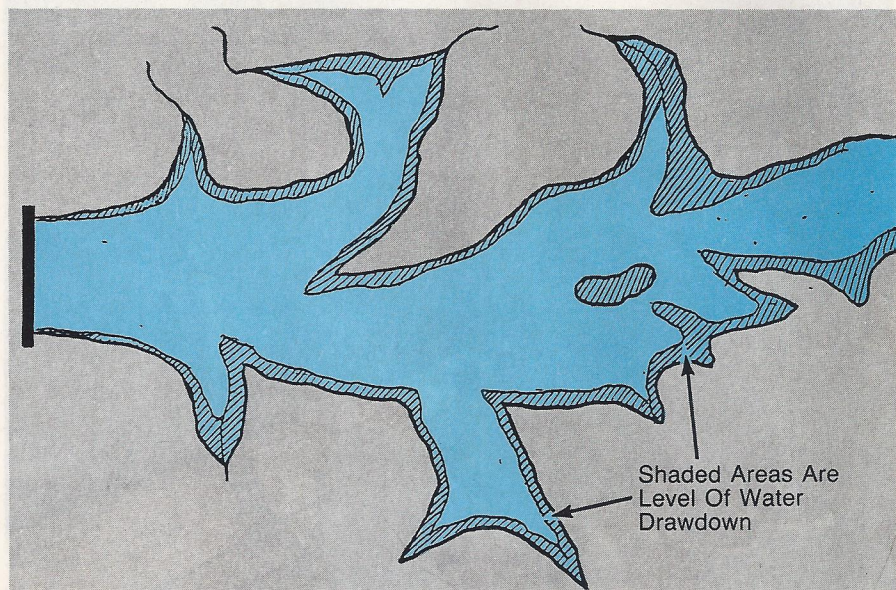
root on the bottom. A changing water level has washed it down to hard clay, sand or rocks. The structure types are rather constant all over the reservoir, the only great difference being depth. Structure is primarily in the form of "bars" that run out from the shoreline. Most all points of land have underwater bars extending from them. At the entrance to all coves, structure exists to some degree. There is a minimum of flats, and most all bottom structure extends to deep water. The water color is white-sandy.

As stated previously, we had better do our straggler fishing in terms of both cold-water conditions (pre-spawn, spawn) and warm-water conditions (post-spawn).

a few. We do not know anything about the lake such as "hot-spots," structure, migration routes, depths, etc. We are unable to pinpoint any particular lure presentation as we do not know the structure the fish use.

Since the fish are not moving, we would not know the exact spots for deep water concentrations of efforts. Oh sure, if we had a working depth sounder we could go look at each likely structure and probably interpret the "contact point," but we don't have one. Besides, this is not the way to "straggler" fish this lake **the first time we are on it**. Now if we had a good weather condition or we were familiar with this lake, then we have an entirely different story.

For now, we have to catch you some fish and learn all we can about the lake.



**FIGURE 1** — An old "lowland" type reservoir, built so long ago that there is not a trace of a bush, stump or root on the bottom. A changing water level has washed it down to hard clay, sand or rocks.

Let me pause here and state that if this lake contained several species of fish, and we were going after walleyes or any other species that had a "spawning run," and we were fishing during the earlier, colder period, we would concentrate our efforts in the upper portions of the reservoir, primarily in the areas of the main channel. After the spawning run we would look at the whole reservoir, just as we would when looking for bass at any period of the season. We'd be sure to look at all areas that had water at least 35 feet deep in the channel. We will approach our fishing in the best way to accomplish our mission, regardless of species or section of the lake.

As a further reminder — we are faced with a very bad weather condition. Consequently, we cannot expect a good movement of fish. It means we are trying to catch a "straggler" here, then another one there, and hope we run across quite

Our approach will be to accomplish this. I might add at this point that until you get more advanced in your mapping, interpretations and presentations, this approach isn't a bad idea in ANY TYPE OF WEATHER on ANY TYPE LAKE. If the weather is good you just catch more fish.

If we are fishing this lake during the pre-spawn and spawning season (colder) we will concentrate our efforts more on steeper shorelines and in the bays or coves. In a lake of this type most all bays and coves would have some sort of channel, thus all could have potential.

We will make our lure presentation both casting and trolling. Since it is a cold-water condition our speed should be slow, but we'll check out several speeds. Most all our effort will be directed toward the shallows. This means that in all areas fished, we will thoroughly check the water to a depth of 8-10 feet. When trolling we will use lure sizes and running depths to



"strain" the water to this depth. When casting we must be sure we cover this shallow zone, regardless what size or style lure we use.

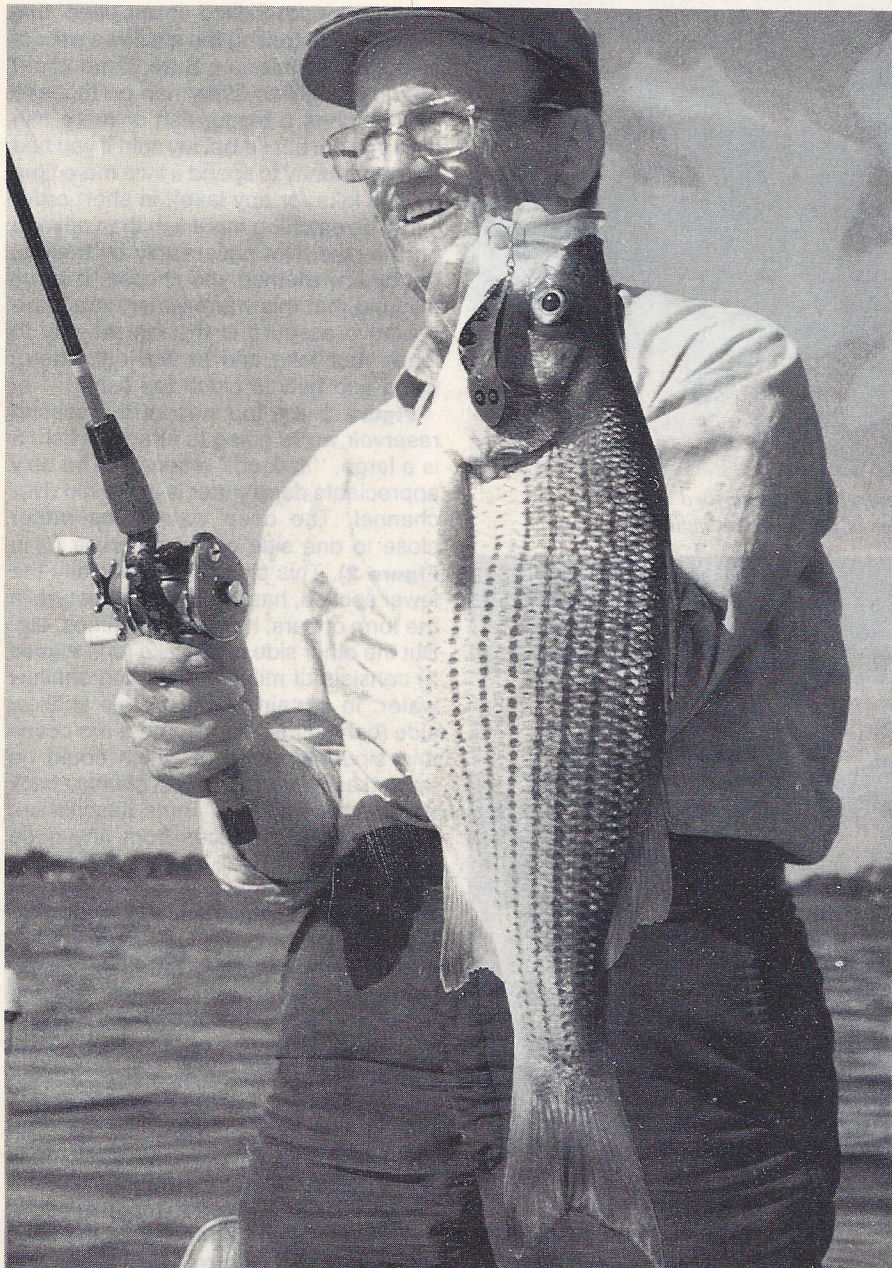
We will troll all steeper shorelines. When we get into the coves we might be able to troll some areas, but our best bet is to go to the cast. All parts of the coves must be worked — all shallow shorelines, "pockets," "breaks," bottoms, and any edges of channels that might exist. The lure speeds should be checked with both free-running plugs and jump-type lures (jigs, soft plastics, etc.). You use one and I'll use the other.

One very important thing we will do throughout the day. When moving from one cove to the next, we will troll the shallows between them. Even though the fish might have found thus far were all in

the coves, we must not pass up this trolling. In this way we assure that we come off the lake knowing more than when we started. During this shallow-water trolling, it would be wise to check deeper water, but briefly, any particular long, shallow point or bar that might show up. But only briefly! For most of the day we get back to trolling the steeper shoreline, shallows and casting the coves.

#### WARM-WATER PERIODS

Now let us straggler fish this lake under a warm-water period. We do not have much choice in what we will do under the prevailing conditions (bad weather, first time on lake, etc.). If we are to get you some fish and I am to find out what makes this lake tick, we will troll the "scatter-point."



Education Editor Buck Perry displays a gamester considered one of the most hard-fighting species found in fresh water: the hybrid striped bass.

First we will check out the shallowest water with our shallowest running lures. If we do not make contact with fish in a short period, we go directly to lures with running depths to cover the section that separates the shallow water from the deep water. This zone would be the water that is 8 to 10-feet deep.

In our case, since there are two of us, we will run two different size lures. If we chose to use Spoonplugs, the person on the "inside" (shallowest side) would put on a #250 series, and the guy on the "outside" (deepest side) would put on a #200 series. First we would adjust the "inside" lure. With 30-40 yards of trolling line let back, the boat would be maneuvered until the lure starts tipping (bumping) the bottom. Then the "outside" man would let out line enough to get his lure tipping (bumping) the bottom. If he can't reach the bottom without running a great amount of line, then the "inside" fisherman should wind in some line. Too often I see the inside troller running so much line the outside guy never does get his lure into proper position. If *either* fisherman is running too much line the contours of the bottom cannot be followed in the best manner. But the main thing here is to get BOTH lures fishing. They are fishing when both are bumping. This does not mean both will be hitting bottom all the time — YOU DO NOT WANT THEM BUMPING ALL THE TIME. Besides, you can't follow the contours that well all the time anyway.

Just a word of caution at this point. If we had a depth sounder that was in working order, we would not try to follow the contours by using the sounder. It may be permissible to glance at it once in awhile, but the guy running the motor has his eyes on the shoreline and on the "inside" line (rod tip). He can thus anticipate and relate curvatures in the bottom by watching the shoreline, and the inside line will indicate if he is trolling too shallow or too deep. In our case we are not tempted to look at the depth sounder too much because we don't have one (on this trip) in the first place.

To carry this "caution" thought a little further, be sure when you are in the front of the boat (when trolling) that you position your rod and line so that the motor-man can see it at all times. I can't recall all the times it took me several days to get over the dizziness and the crick in my neck as a result of trying to watch the other fisherman's rod tip. Probably some of you might recall a time when suddenly you stopped catching fish and I began to catch them all. Maybe you never were aware that when my neck and shoulders began to burn like they were on fire I said "to heck with it" and moved my lure into position, and let your lure run where it would. So the next time you start waving your rod tip around like some reed in the wind, or let it drop to a position where the

*continued*



# When Fishing's Tough

motorman is straining to keep his eyes on it, don't be surprised if suddenly he starts catching all the fish.

This might be a good place to mention another tip. On our last trip, everytime your lure started walking bottom you either started jerking the rod or let it drop back. Not only did you stop the action of the lure, but you stayed hung up much of the time. When the lure starts tipping or walking, **HOLD THE ROD STEADY**, regardless how light or how hard it pulls. This will allow the lure to work properly and it will walk over most bottoms without hanging up.

With our lures in position, away we go. We just keep going — following all shorelines on the main body of the lake. We might turn into the larger coves for a short distance, but it wouldn't be long until we cut across the cove and get back to the main body of the lake. When we come to small coves or "pockets" we go right on by without turning into them. However, at each cove or pocket we pay very close attention to the handling of the boat, as each one will likely have some type structure or "break" on both sides of the entrance.

If we happen to catch a fish at any particular place, we troll over it again to see if additional fish are there. We will not spend much time here, we'll be off and

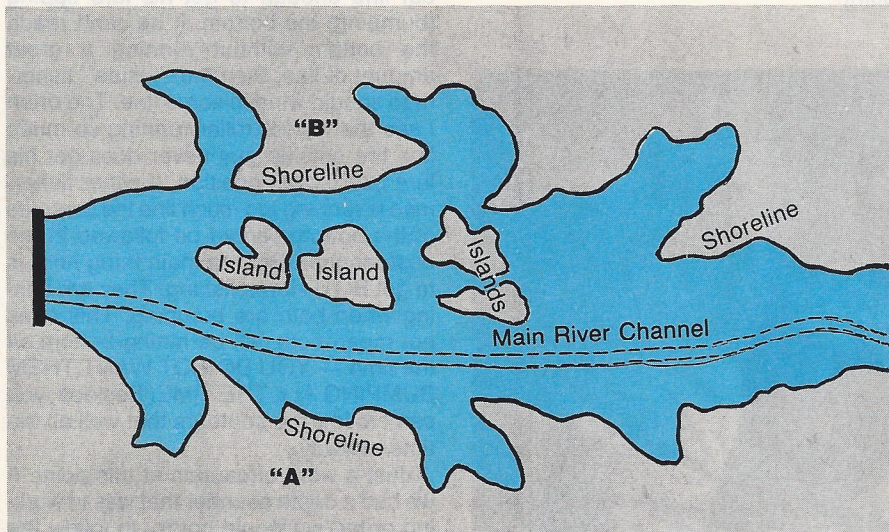
running again. We just keep going, and most likely cover most of the lake before the day is over, for we'll be "balling the jack" (speed trolling) due to the warm water.

If you were trolling this lake by yourself you would select a lure to check out the shallower section of this zone (8-9 feet) first. Then you would select a lure to check out the deeper section (9-10 feet). It is not out of order to get slightly out of this "scatter zone" (7-11 feet), but your aim is to spend most of your time working the 8 to 10-foot section. If your lure sizes are limited, choose one that will run at least 10 feet deep. You can work all sections of this zone by simply varying your line length used in trolling.

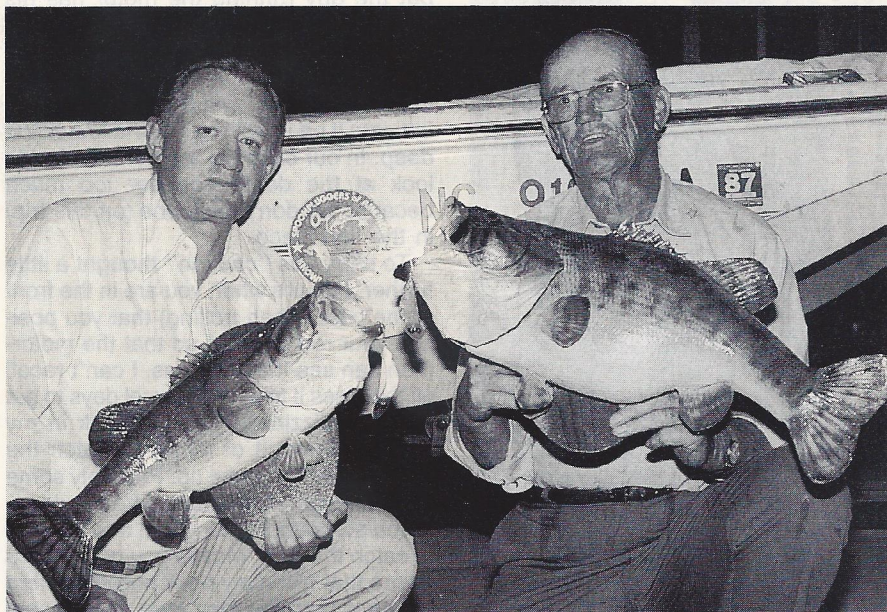
In the future you will probably be faced with straggler fishing more in warm weather than you will in cold. I'm sure *more* fishermen will face it during the warmer period. Skilled or unskilled, this procedure of trolling the shallows will accomplish the mission. Sure, there might be a more skilled fisherman on the lake who catches a bigger fish or more fish than you do, but I'd bet my shirt if you had the opportunity to spend a little more time on this lake (or any lake), in short order you'd be catching more fish than anyone on the lake. Not necessarily by trolling, but by any method you choose. It is my thinking that this warm-water, straggler-fishing procedure is the fastest way to learn your lake and to find out where, when and how to catch the fish.

**Figure 2** is a top view of the second reservoir we're going to straggler fish. It is a large, "flatland" reservoir. The only appreciable deep water is in the old river channel. The deep water runs rather close to one side of the reservoir (**A** in **Figure 2**). This side, and especially the lower section, has fairly good structure in the form of bars, humps, breaklines, etc. But the other side of the lake (**B** in **Figure 2**) consists of miles of flats and shallow water. In certain areas on this shallow side (behind the islands) there are coves and sloughs, some of which could be termed as "swampy." Most of these back areas have weeds of some description, and are long distances from any deep water. We launch our boat on the deeper side. The water color is red-muddy.

As before, let us first look at it as if we were there during the colder part of the season (pre-spawn/spawn). Here again, we start on the steeper, deeper side and in the coves. Due to the bad weather and the muddy water condition, our efforts will be directed toward the *shallowest* section of the shallows. During a muddy condition, during the colder season, any fish that move toward the shallows will many times "go all the way." I have found them so shallow at times the most effective casts were those I placed up on the bank before starting the retrieve. What this means is that in trolling the shorelines we have to use our shallowest-running lures



**FIGURE 2** —Top view of a large "flatland" reservoir (as described in article). In this example, the only appreciable deep water is found in the main river channel.



In many prime natural lakes and reservoirs, big bass can sometimes be taken by straggler fishing even on the tough fishing days. But the term "big bass" is quite relative. Here Fishing Facts Managing Editor Carl Malz (left) displays a mounted specimen that would be considered a "big bass" (5 to 6 pounds) in northern waters, while Education Editor Buck Perry displays a 12-pound kegmouth taken from a lake in the deep South. Each size fish would be regarded as a trophy in its natural habitat.



more, and when we go to the cast our lures must be placed as shallow as possible. We should find our most effective speed is slow. Most likely on the cast a "jump-type" lure in the form of a night-crawler, plastic worm, spinner/jig combination, etc. is best. This might be a good time for you to work your favorite surface lure. But regardless what lure is used, all speeds from fast to slow should be checked while casting.

We proceed very much as we did in the last reservoir, but in this case we will probably spend a greater portion of our time casting the coves. But, here again, we troll the shallows as we move from cove to cove.

Although I said the trolling speed would be slow in this colder part of the season, I did not mean we would not cover some ground. It is important when fishing muddy water that you keep moving to see what exists in the lake (bottom conditions, structure, "breaks," depths, etc.), and to see if there are sections with a better water color. Normally when the main body of the lake is extremely muddy, there will still exist areas with more clarity. These areas could be either toward the headwaters or toward the dam. By moving from cove to cove, we are certain to find some with better water color. The coves normally do not muddy up as fast or as much as the main body of the lake. However, at certain periods of the year you might find the coves with less clarity than the main section of the lake. The type feeder stream would have a bearing on the water color existing in each.

Since I have to get you some fish (if possible), I will reluctantly go to the next area of the second phase of our straggler fishing in this lake. This is the "back area," a long distance from any appreciable deep water. We'll pass up all those large flats and shallow-water sections on the one side of the lake, and proceed directly to the shallow back coves and sloughs. You can almost bet these will have more clarity, and in some cases will be too clear for best results.

There may be fish in these areas (provided there is cover) that stay here all the time. This is "home" to them and they are not even aware there is any deep water in the lake. I like to refer to them as "grass bass." I might add areas such as these exist in both natural and man-made lakes.

Most likely when we get back into these areas you will be doing most of the casting, while I fiddle with my tackle and handle the boat. You would, of course, be using lures for working over, around and through the type of cover present (grass, weeds, pads, brush, etc.).


Much too often I see too many fishermen proceeding directly to areas such as these to do ALL their fishing, regardless of season, weather or water conditions. They zoom in their big, fast boats right over the deep water where the *mass* of the fish will be found. I am sure this is due

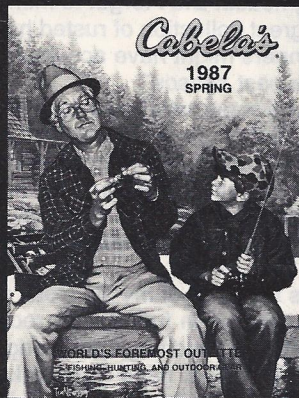
in part to their not knowing the habits of big fish or how to fish "open" or "deep" water. There are many things wrong with this approach. To name a few: (1) He is always straggler fishing; (2) he is fishing blind — other than casting to visible objects; (3) in most instances there is no "mass" of fish in these areas; (4) more small fish than large ones; (5) normally the water is clear; (6) weather affects the fish in these areas just as it does in other areas, and in most cases it affects them MORE, as they do not have the depths and water color to help offset some of the ill effects. The fish lie very dormant under the cover, and they *cannot* be reached with the lures. (7) The fisherman who spends most of his time casting these areas will resist accepting the fishing facts: (a) the fact that lunker fish school; (b) the deep water is the home of the fish; (c) structure and its importance; (d) movements of the fish; (e) weather and water conditions and how they affect his success or failure. (8) He could fish a lifetime and never become a better fisherman, and (9) I could name more, but I think this is enough.

You might have wondered why I stated you would be doing most of the fishing while I fiddled with my tackle or handled the boat. I get no satisfaction working these areas for all the reasons given above, but primarily due to the fact I **cannot "learn" enough in this manner.** I will fish structure and deeper water at the expense of no catch at all. If I have to strag-

gler fish, I will do it where deep water is available to me — as well as the fish.

But these areas (back areas, sloughs, etc.) DO have their advantages at times. When the weather and water conditions are so bad as to make the rest of the lake unfishable, these areas can provide protection from the weather and better water conditions. Some of these areas may contain lots of fish during the spawning season — **if they are not too far from deep water, and the bottom has features that would lead the fish to the area.** (It is not likely the "back areas," as shown in **Figure 2**, would receive additional fish during the spawning season.)

In straggler fishing this muddy lake under warmer conditions (post-spawn) we would spend much of our time trolling the shallows and we'd be especially sure to work on both sides of the old river channel. With our *increased* speed we would cover a lot of ground. But we would pass up all coves and all "back areas." We'd find the best water color, learn the lake, and catch any stragglers that might have moved up. By working the lake in this manner, if we ever came back and found a better weather and water condition, little time would be lost before our efforts would be on the best structure, and we'd be presenting our lures in the best manner to make a lunker catch about as fast as we could reel them in. Be sure to bring your casting rod, for most likely this is the way we will catch our fish. Until next time, give it some thought. 



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