

DON'T WASTE TIME FISHING THE WRONG AREAS

by JIM VAUGHN
Contributing Editor

When visiting new and unfamiliar waters, rushing to begin fishing can be a costly error. There are times when it is much better to scout several areas before you begin wetting a line.



All I could see as I looked out over the water was a mass of standing dead trees. In the distance I could hear the powerful hum of an outboard motor. "Surely", I thought to myself, "that cat's not running his boat at high speed through this jungle." Ker-Wham!!! Then silence. "Well, I guess he was running it at a high speed," I said to myself.

My wife looked out the camper door and said, "What was that loud noise?" "Some wild man tearing through that jungle just hit a log, stump, or something." "I hope it didn't sink him."

The early morning silence was then broken only by faint distant voices. "You O.K.?" "Yeah, I'm O.K., what about you?" "I guess I'm O.K." "Looks like it tore the lower unit off the motor." The comments that followed cannot be put into print, but I can assure you those two were most unhappy.

This was my introduction to huge, sprawling Toledo Bend, a 181,600 acre man-made reservoir consisting of approximately 1,200 miles of shoreline, located on the Texas/Louisiana border. This lake has gained quite a reputation for good bass fishing. Stories of large stringers of "hawg" bass coming out of this lake are not uncommon. However, some fishermen seem to have their problems there. One fisherman told me he was so disgusted with fishing there he didn't think he would go back. He said that he and a buddy had fished there for 3 days with a guide and only caught a total of 12 fish, all small.

I had *ignored* repeated warnings to leave my bottom-bumping lures at home due to the amount of brush and trees in the lake. My wife and I made this trip to Toledo in early April of '74 with thoughts of lowering the bass population somewhat. My game plan had been to arrive before dark, have a "look-see" to determine water color, and to look at the lay of the land to get an idea of what type of structure to expect. Well, all good game plans don't always turn out as expected. It was black dark when we arrived. Fortunately I had a pretty good map of the lake with most of the marinas and camp areas shown. We chose a campground in the upper end of the lake located adjacent to a large cove that had a creek running through it.

The time of year (spawn and pre-

spawn) called for checking the shorter underwater bars near the entrances to coves, as well as checking the coves themselves. During the spawn and pre-spawn periods, I do not *ordinarily* spend a great deal of time on long structures out in the main channel of the lake but rather spend more time probing cove and creek arm areas for movements of fish. Also, my thinking was that the water color would probably be better in the upper end of the cove and the submerged creek channel would provide the necessary structure for bass.

I was right as far as water color was concerned. It could be classified as almost muddy (just right to suit me). As for the fish population, I can't really say. After 2 days of trying to fish (I was limited to casting only with weedless lures) my score was 3 bass; none in the "hawg" size bracket.

This area contained miles and miles of almost flat bottom. The large level expanse of standing trees indicated this. The points and bars were located long distances from the old creek channel and, even though it was during the spawning season, I figured it would take an exceptionally good weather condition to bring the fish to the shallows. The sky was clear blue. A cold front had gone through two days prior. More than likely the fish would be in their home area, the creek channel, deep and inactive. We decided to give the shallow water (out to a depth of 10 feet) a check anyway. There was a chance the near-muddy water would partially offset the bright light conditions and coupled with the spawning urge would put the bass in the shallows. For about two and one-half hours my wife and I pounded the banks with spinner baits, swimming lures, topwater plugs and plastic worms. As mentioned before, the brush and trees were so thick, trolling was impossible. The net result of all this casting was a big fat zero. Nothing, not even a 6 inch to show for our efforts.

What should we do next? Continue casting the shoreline because it was spawning time and the fish have "just gotta" be there? Not on your life! The two-and-a-half hours of unproductive casting in the shallow water plus my interpretation of weather and water conditions had me convinced the fish, at this time,



definitely were not in the shallow water. You can fish 'till your arms fall off, use every lure in your tackle box and some that you borrow from your buddy, but if the fish "ain't" there, you "ain't" gonna catch them.

I felt it was time to head for the creek channel, their home. We spent the next six hours knocking on doors by casting the breaks and breaklines (see "Fishing Talk — our language of structure fishing" in this issue) along the creek channel and down in the channel itself. Again, too much brush and trees prevented trolling. Consequently only a small section of the creek channel was covered as compared to the distance we could have covered by trolling. We didn't have to use floating markers too much because the lack of trees indicated where the channel was. When in doubt, I used my depth finder. We concentrated our efforts on the outside turn of all bends. The day ended with only two fish being caught, between 1½ and 2 pounds.

I can hear it now. Someone is saying "You messed up Jim due to the fact that it was spawning time you should have stayed with the shoreline and in 6 hours you would have caught more than 2 fish. And I think the fact that you wasted so much time such a long way from the shallow water, way out in the lake on the submerged creek channels and caught only 2 'bananas' (small fish) proves me right."

Well, I will agree in part with what you say. We probably would have caught 6 or 8 small bass had we continued to fish the bank. But when you say it was a mistake to go directly from the shallow water to the creek channel to continue our fishing, I am going to have to disagree with you.

It is a fact that we only caught 2 fish and this is certainly not even a fair catch even if weather conditions were marginal. But, I still maintain my mistake was not in fishing the creek channels and banks which contained the breaks and breaklines. But you are right about making a mistake. I did make one and that mistake was not taking the time to DRIVE AROUND THE LAKE AND LOCATE THE GOOD AREAS OF STRUCTURE PRIOR TO PUTTING THE BOAT IN THE WATER. If I had done this, I would have located an area clear of the brush and trees (I later found this type of water in To-

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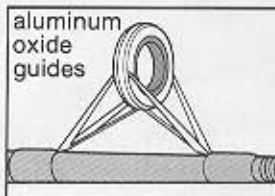
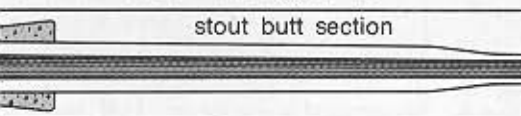
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ledo Bend) and started my fishing there. If the fish weren't found in the shallow water, I could have started trolling the breaks and breaklines along the creek channel thereby covering many times the amount of creek bank we covered in 6 hours of casting, and consequently increased our chances of locating and catching fish.

This error probably cost us about 20 fish our first day out. Now I am not saying there were no fish in the tree-infested area we fished that day. In fact I know there were, and a structure fisherman with the time could have eventually located them. **EVENTUALLY**, I said! But I wanted to get into fish quickly, make good catches and when my week's vacation was up, leave with the satisfaction of a successful fishing trip.

I could see that success would come quickly only after locating some clean and workable structure. Six more fishing days and we would have to leave. Weather conditions were not stable, as a cold front was coming through every 3 or 4 days. This is to be expected during this time of the year (April) so I had to plan accordingly. Wind can usually be expected after the front, and on Toledo Bend, high wind means no fishing on the main body of the lake at all. So my job was to find open water with good color in an area that offered some protection from the wind.

My second day on the lake found me searching for a desirable area. I did a lot of traveling that day and found what I was looking for with the exception of protection from the wind. I was tempted to stay at this location for one more day and hope the wind would stop, as the area had great potential. I had found three points that led all the way to the creek channel, had located the place where the creek entered the river channel, and some excellent crooks and turns in the old river channel. The water was 40 feet deep in the channel of the river so I could reach the breaks and breaklines along the bank with no trouble; however, it would require going to wire line and trolling.

Rough water prevented me from fishing these spots my second day, so I found a cove protected from the wind and got in some more casting practice. I use the word "practice" because that's just about all I ac-

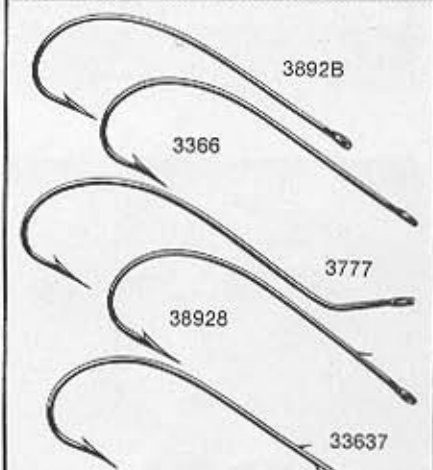
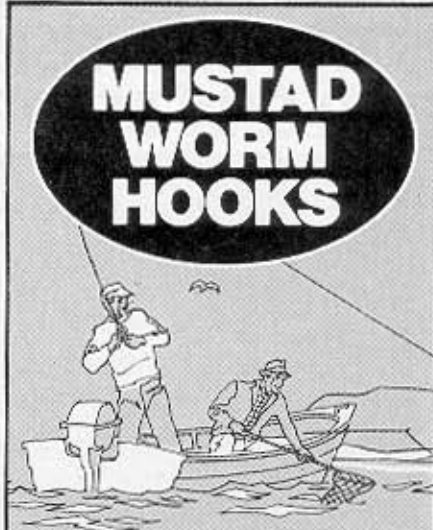
complished. Just at dark I did manage to take a three pounder on a topwater "Chugger".

Although I wasn't enthusiastic over the day's catch, I was pleased with the structure I'd found. Maybe there would be less wind by tomorrow and we could "hang some hawks". I thought about it some more after supper that night and decided I'd better come up with an alternate plan. Chances were that the wind would not stop blowing and the possibility of another front passing through told me I'd best come up with a very good alternate plan or I might be going back to San Antonio singing a "sad song".

I got my topo map out and started looking it over carefully. Past experience told me if I could find a long "finger cove" with a creek running through it, I could score with the spawning bass. Sure enough I found it about two-thirds of the way down toward the dam. The thing that concerned me now was the color of the water down there. Most of the time, the water near the dam area will be a good bit clearer than the headwaters and the long finger cove indicated steep banks with a stream coming from hilly country. This would mean even clearer water in the cove. Now the last thing I needed was clear water to go with the existing clear light conditions. But I could see this cove was protected from the prevailing northwest winds. I finally made up my mind.

I would get up at daylight and if the wind wasn't blowing I would fish the good structures I had located. If there was wind, I intended to create some strong breezes myself getting my camper packed, boat loaded and "heading out". I got busier than a "Cat on a hot tin roof" when the wind hit me in the face as I stepped out of the camper Tuesday morning. My wife wasn't too pleased with all the hustle going on. That strong northwest wind early in the morning just didn't impress her the same way as it did me. Today would mark the third day since the last front and I figured I could catch some fish if I could just get down the lake to the cove I had located. Moving always takes time. I would be happy indeed to settle for a 2 P.M. launch time.

Luck was with us, as we found a marina with a good campground located at the mouth of the cove and I was able to get my boat into the wa-



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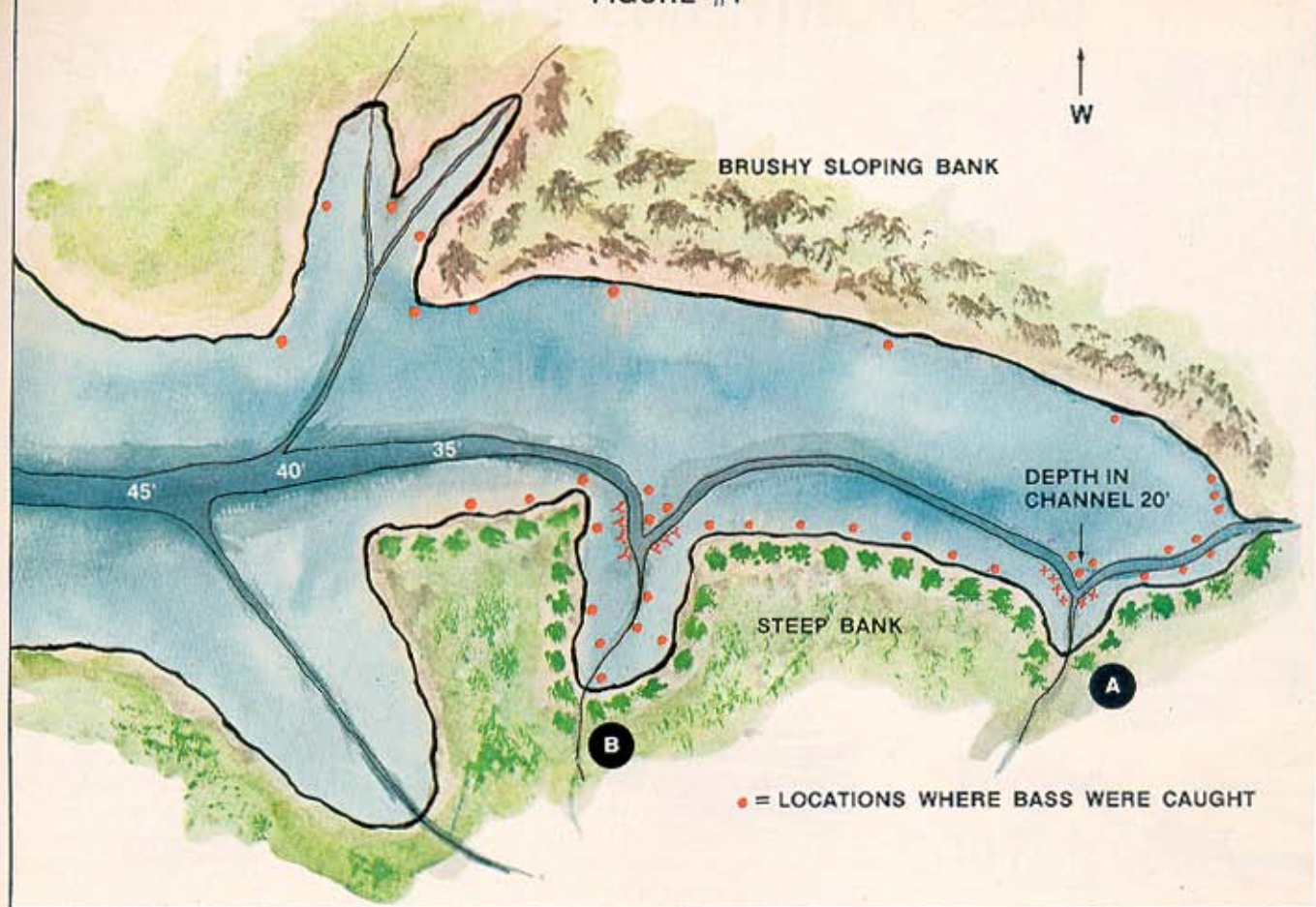
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FIGURE #1



ter and get started fishing by 2:30 P.M. My wife had decided to stay at the camper and straighten things out a little. She would fish with me Wednesday. Now I could have told her that another front might come through and the next day's fishing would be tough but it wouldn't have changed her mind and there's no time to argue when there's fish to be caught.

Believe me, I had the "fever" as I pushed off the bank and fired up my outboard motor. I quickly noted the water color was pretty good (not too clear), but not as good as it had been in the upper end of the lake. In less than 5 minutes I was across the cove and fishing. I looked up the cove and figured it to be about a mile and a quarter long. At the mouth it was a quarter mile wide but it quickly narrowed down to 300 yards. At the upper end where the creek entered, it was no more than 100 yards wide. My topo map showed the underwater creek to be very close to the right side of the cove going upstream. If this were true, then the fishing would be better on the right side also. I could see the

bank was steeper on that side indicating the map was right. Bass areas that always produce best for me during the spawn are the steeper banks and especially any side pockets or coves that lie adjacent to this steeper side.

Look at figure #1, areas A and B. These are the type of side pockets I am referring to. Note how the creek channel swings in close to the pocket, forming a "U" right in the mouth of the pocket. Friends, when you find a place like this during the spawning season, you are in for some fun. The larger bass will usually be located at this structure. But wait a minute. I didn't know these structures existed when I first started fishing that afternoon. Let's take ourselves back up to the mouth of the cove and see what happened.

"Fired up" and ready to go, I snapped a small 500 series Spoon-plug on. This is a very small lure about an inch long and will put a Go-Go girl to shame when it comes to wiggling, if trolled at a fast clip. I let out about 20 yards of line and hadn't gone 50 feet when "sock-o" a bass of about a pound and three

quarters had it. Now at this time I was trolling up the west side of the cove because I steer the motor with my left hand and hold the rod with my right. I wanted the small lure right up against the bank so things were working out fine. Trolling would put me down the steeper east bank in just a few minutes so I wasn't concerned that I wasn't fishing the east bank first.

One bass in the boat and how many to go? I never kill the motor when I catch a fish, so just as soon as I dropped the bass in my live well, I was off and at it again. I rounded a little side cove and "blip", I had another one. As I went out the other side, just around the point another bass "scuffed up" my lure. Three bass in the live well and ten minutes hadn't passed since I first put my lure in the water. I don't catch them up in the shallow water much, but it was evident that if things continued as they started, I would be doing a lot of culling before nightfall. The legal limit of bass was 14 on the Louisiana side.

Those "pearly whites" were showing as I started after my fourth fish.

Anyone might be caught doing a little priming in the same situation. "Crunk", my cat was thrashing again. Another bait! Before I knew it, I was in the upper end of the cove. Two more baits were caught as I rolled the lure across the upper end. Six baits were in the live well as I worked down the steeper outer bank. Time to do a little humming and strutting. Things were getting better.

My lure was disappearing off lurch and side-ups as I kept it tight up against the bank. It was running in water less than 2 feet deep. The thing that surprised me most was the speed required to make the lure swim. The water had warmed up considerably and especially so in the coves, but I never thought when I started that it would take this kind of speed to force a strike. I must have been trolling at least 10 or 12 miles per hour! I was knocking up a wake a foot high behind the lure. I should, however, mention once again that this was SHALLOW WATER fishing. When trolling deep water (greater than 6 - 10 ft.) speed is reduced to achieve a steady bottom bumping action.

I guarantee, if a non-trotter had been watching me bait at that speed he would have had the boys with the straight-jackets waiting for me at the marina when I got back. As far as I am concerned, speed control is one of the good things about trolling. It teaches you more in a short period of time than perhaps anything else. It is very easy to go from a slow crawl to full clip and all speeds in between. From what I've seen, many fishermen who cast all the time use only speeds that I describe as slow and slower. In my opinion, trolling should include all speeds from very slow to as fast as I can possibly wind "her" in. I try all speeds before I have a casting area.

Of course there are times when speed control is not so critical. I believe when you find a school of bass actively feeding, activity of the lure isn't nearly as important as when the fish are up and NOT actively feeding. Being along a bad weather and water condition and speed control can be extremely critical. There are a lot of things I may forget when I go fishing, but speed control is not one of them.

The bass that I was catching were not feeding. I later observed my first

at camp and they had nothing in their stomachs. Speed was "putting it on them". Speed was also helping me to cover a lot of shoreline quickly and it was just a few minutes until I was approaching another little side feeder some almost identical to the first one I found. I knew it was going to happen — I was going to catch some more bass off the point at the mouth of the cove and sure enough I got one! Then another, back in the cove a little way, and as I "shot" around the point on the opposite side I took the third one. Bait like this are the ones that give a man the "beer" so he'll give up eating, sleeping and chasing pretty girls just to go "fishing". Of course, if he's married he just goes to eating and sleeping.

When I reached the end of the cove, I turned the boat around and planned to make my second trolling pass. I decided to put on a lure that ran a little deeper just to see what would happen. Again I let out 20 yards of line, opened the throttle enough to achieve the same previously successful speed and "let her out". The little side cove was just up ahead and I figured it to be good for at least two more bass and maybe more. That's what I got for thinking. I didn't catch a thing! As a matter of fact, I rolled this entire shoreline all the way down to the end of the cove without catching another fish. What the heck was wrong?

The only difference in my first trolling run with the greater lure was that I was running the lure in shallower water. The second pass was made at the same speed and with the same line length, but there was another small difference — I was picking up some moss; and at times so much moss that I couldn't shake it off. I had to reel in my lure and pull the moss off by hand. My first thought was to go back to the small lure, but I decided to make one more pass with the deeper running lure. I would make a change though. There is a little hand rule that I follow. The more difficult the water is to troll due to brush, trees, bushes, cove, reef, etc., the shorter the length I use. I can "dog gum" near well through a jungle, when necessary, using this method. Sure I'll get tiring occasionally, but the cast re-



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(Continued on page 105)

speed just hadn't made much difference.

I continued to troll this cove until about 30 minutes before dark. I had caught a total of 45 bass, all of which had been released except my limit of 14. Later, as I was fileting my fish, the wind began to pick up and dark clouds started moving in from the northwest. Looked like another front was moving in.

Wednesday morning found the sky clear. My wife was anxious to get started fishing as I had told her of all the fun I'd had Tuesday afternoon. I warned her not to expect the same exciting fishing because of the front.

I really didn't expect to find the fish in the shallow water but it would only take a little while to check it out. Spawning period or not, the bad weather condition would effect the first just as any other time — put them down into the deepest water available.

We didn't catch any fish in the shallow water even though we worked lures all the way from the shallow water to a depth of 10 feet. Having done this, it was very plain to me that the "spawning" bass were not in the shallows — no need to spend any more time looking for them there. I knew exactly what I was going to do and where I was going to do it. Please look again at Figure #1. Notice how the creek swings in and makes a nice bend right in the mouth of the side feeder cove ("A"). Here was good structure, maybe the best in the area, a side feeder stream entering a main stream.

The water depth in the channel was 20 feet, the deepest water in the area. The bass just almost had to be there. Because of the spawning period, I felt they wouldn't be too far away. Later on, after the spawn, during the warm water period, I would have looked for them further down the channel in much deeper water, probably about 35 feet.

We dropped a couple of floating markers as reference points for our trolling passes. On our second pass we found them. They were bunched up right at "X" in Figure #1. We caught 11 bass before it ended. Again I knew exactly what I was going to do. We went to the next side feeder cove ("B") and followed the same procedure. The bass were there also. Position "Y", Figure #1. We took 10 fish here. Although we

MOON UP - MOON DOWN

Most fishermen know that there is usually a "normal" fish activity period at dawn and at dusk. Many men will fish at no other times.

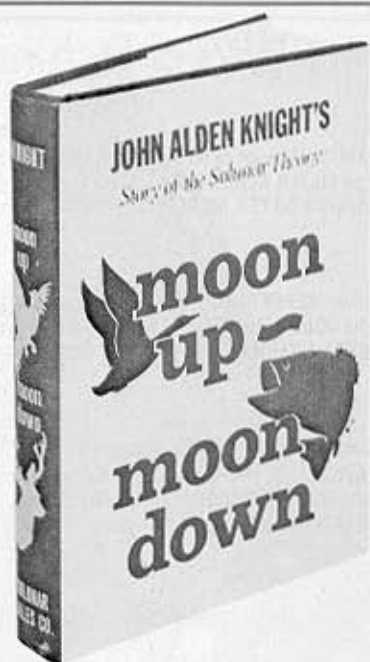
However, fishermen have always encountered "odd hour" feeding periods and while they were quick to take advantage of them, they were slow to understand why they occurred.

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fell far short of the 45 bass I caught the day before, we were satisfied with our catch under existing weather conditions. All the bass caught that day were released.

Thursday the sky looked pretty much the same, mostly clear with a few high clouds appearing in the afternoon. We worked the creek bank all day, fished hard, and managed to get two limits.

Friday the bass moved back up into the shallows and we went to work on them "hot and heavy". We first located them by trolling. The speed was fast, just the same as it was Tuesday afternoon when I made such a good catch. We decided since there were good numbers of bass spawning in the shallows we would cast for them. After casting a while and catching nothing, we started trolling again and immediately caught a fish. We would stop and start casting again. As before, it produced almost nothing. We cast every lure and color in the tackle box including crank baits, spinner baits, plastic worms and swimming baits. Total fish caught that day was 30 — 25 caught trolling and 5 caught by casting. I believe the only reason we could not catch many on the cast

was the fact that we could not reel the lure fast enough to get the required speed.

Certainly not all spawning periods require high lure velocity to make the fish take. We have made good catches at other times during the spawning period by doing nothing but casting. However, it wouldn't work on this particular trip. In fact, I'm afraid the trip would have been a failure had we not been set up to do some trolling. Friday night another front went through, this time a pretty severe one. We really had to fish hard Saturday to catch 18 fish. Those we did catch were along the breaks and breaklines where the channel was 27 feet deep. The lure speed was slow. Quite a contrast as to what was required the day before.

Don't get stuck on one lure speed. You could be doing everything right, right structure, right lure, right depth but wrong speed and not catch a fish. Don't let this turn you into a "grumbler". Use different speeds until you find the correct one and you will become a whistler — or a hummer; and in good weather and water conditions — maybe even a singer. Try it!



Contributing Editor Jim Vaughn is an accomplished angler who can usually find the whereabouts of a few lunker bass on most any lake. In this article he points out some of the difficulties he encountered while fishing on an unfamiliar lake and what he did to trigger some early spring action.

jority of the time I will rip the lure through. I've also learned that trolling in thick stuff absolutely requires retying the lure frequently. I had to lose a tackle box half full of lures to get this in my thick head. You know what they say about experience being the best teacher — it can also be the most expensive!

My boat is 14 feet long. I let out the same length of line which put the lure to running right in the boil of the motor. My first impression was that the lure was too close behind the boat but I decided to try it there for a short distance and if I didn't catch anything I would let out a little more line. I never got around to letting out any more line, for not more than 25 yards after I dropped my lure in the water, it had a bass by the snout. Hot dog! I was back in business again. The only problem I had now was deciding if I would hum or sing. The fishing was far too good for whistling.

I was almost to the mouth of the cove again and had caught a total of 20 bass. The short line and deeper running lure was catching more fish than the smaller lure used with a longer line length. Bass number 21 had just inhaled my lure and I was reeling him in when I heard the roar of another outboard. I looked up and a large bass boat, about an 18 footer, was heading into the mouth of the cove. In about 2 seconds a guy was letting his electric motor down

into the water. The boat carried 2 men and a woman. Quicker'n you can say "howdy" they were shooting casts toward the bank. I wanted to give them plenty of room so I turned my boat around and started trolling in the opposite direction. One of the little side feeder coves was just in front of me. I had caught a bass on every trolling pass across the point of this cove and this pass was no different. I had a limit of bass in the live well and had been culling for some time now. The one I just caught was no bigger than the ones in the live well so I eased him back into the water.

About that time one of the guys in the large boat yelled something to me but I was too far away to understand what he was saying. I cut the throttle when I got within voice range. "Having any luck?", asked the fellow running the electric motor. "Just boated number 22," I said. "TWENTY TWO!", said the guy in the back of the boat. "How long have you been fishing?" "About an hour and 45 minutes," I replied. "What about you all? Are you doing any good?"

"We have only eight bass," the older fellow said, "and we've been fishing hard. Did you catch your fish trolling?"

"Yes," I said, "I haven't tried casting yet." The younger guy up in front said "Maybe we'll catch some in this cove. By the way, what are you

catching them on?" I held up my trolling rod and my lure. "Ugliest thing I ever saw," he said.

I just grinned, "Ugly or not, it's putting a 'whipping' on these bass."

"You're right about that," said the older fellow. "If a guy's got the right lure, he can put it on them can't he?"

I thought to myself, "Sure, if he will use the correct speed and depth with the correct lure." As I pulled away I mentioned that it was taking a lot of lure speed to make the bass strike, but as I watched them casting later I realized what I had said about



How would you like to catch over 40 bass a day, keep only your limit, and release the rest? Jim Vaughn reveals how he did it and how you can do the same.