

KEYS TO HELP YOU CATCH BASS IN FLORIDA

Here are some pointers on Florida fishing waters that should help make a visiting bass fisherman's trip more enjoyable and rewarding.

by Buck Perry, Education Editor

About the time it begins to get cold up north, some folks begin to get wise and start thinking like a duck! As a consequence, we receive lots of requests for information concerning lakes and bass fishing in Florida. At times we are able to provide information on a particular body of water (if the letter writer asks for it—and we know anything about it), but in most instances, our best advice is to remind them of the fact that a bass in Florida is no different from a bass up north.

For those who know the "structure fisherman's" (Spoonplugger's) guidelines, we can at times recommend a certain lake that will provide features (structure, breaks, breaklines, deep water, etc.) which give them a better chance for consistent success and, at the same time, give them a chance to "get one for the wall."

Too often, bass fishermen visiting Florida for the first time forget Florida has changing weather just as other parts of the country, especially in the colder part of the season. It may not be as severe as in other parts, but the reaction of the fish to the changes can be the same. Factors that make the changes just as bad are the depths and conditions found in the lakes.

Some Florida lakes are large and some are small. Most are rather shallow when compared to natural lakes in some northern areas. Many are infested with some type weed, and most have soft or dirty bottoms. These things can create problems under any type "weather." Let it change for the

worse (just unstable) and most fishermen start having trouble making a catch.

If a fish does not have the *depth* of water to help offset a bad weather condition, it can become *MORE* dormant for a *longer* period of time than a fish with deep water available. A fish is a cold-blooded creature, and "depth" is the only good sanctuary he has from a changing environment.

If the fish becomes dormant under or in the weeds, not only is he "non-chasing," but in most cases the fisherman is not likely to get the lure (or bait) close enough, or long enough to make contact.

Working the bottom is very important in getting an inactive fish to "take." If the bottom is soft or dirty, our lure presentation is limited to a great degree. If we can't control the depth and speed as desired, we are not likely to get the fishing results desired.

All I've said thus far hasn't changed the facts one iota from the North, East or West. All I've done is try to make you aware that just because it's Florida (or any other state), the picking's aren't likely to be any easier than any other place. However, there are some things we can point out about Florida fishing waters that should help make your visit more enjoyable and more rewarding as far as bass fishing is concerned.

Some of the Florida fishing spots could be classified as just small, shallow sink-hole "ponds" with

continued

Right. Fishing Facts Education Editor, Buck Perry, with several good size "keepers."



Buck talks fishing

weeds to a certain degree. There is not much to be pointed out about these that would add anything or be of any help.

As stated, most Florida "lakes" (large or small) are shallow, have soft or dirty bottoms which make them difficult to work, and the weather isn't always good. However, you and I MUST establish some helpful guidelines (for successful fishing) regardless of the lake size or its condition. With this thought in mind, let's try to establish some guidelines *directed toward, and for, most ALL Florida "lakes"* (not the small, so-called sink-hole "ponds").

The structure fishermen's (Spoon-plugger's) *basic guideline* says the fish will spend the *greater* part of their time someplace in the deep or deepest water in the area being fished—due to conditions of weather, or water, or both. It also says we must use the features (structure, breaks, breaklines) of the bottom as our guide as to where the fish will be found. To *consistently* catch the fish we must present our lures (or bait) on, and/or around these bottom features. And we must not forget *MOST* of the time when the fish leave the deep water (become active), *they will not travel all the way to the shoreline shallows.*

These parts of the BASIC guideline should indicate to all the *FIRST information (or knowledge) to determine is where the deep water exists in a lake we choose to fish.*

Figure 1 is a top view of a portion of a shallow Florida lake. In this case the deep water (or deepest water in the area, and probably the *only* deep water in the whole lake) is in an area where the sand has been pumped out to build up a shoreline building lot. There are instances where a deeper section (hole) has been created by pumping water for irrigation or sand for a bathing beach.

Quite often, a wall has been built along the shoreline to hold the pumped-out sand. These walls are easy to see, and the areas should be checked out. At times the hole or slot may be a short distance out in the lake. At other times it may lie so close to the shoreline you may miss it entirely—thinking you are getting too shallow.

If a "grove" (orange grove, etc.) comes close to the lake, you should check out the depths along the orchard. At times you can see the irrigation equipment or pipes leading into the water. Most of the time the breaklines or sudden drops into these

pumped-out holes can be "sharp" (fast breaking). Whatever the reason for deeper water, our guideline in fishing a lake of this type successfully is to find the deep or deepest water in the lake.

Figure 2 is a top view showing the conditions found in many Florida lakes. Most of the lake bottom is

shallow, flat, and dirty. It may have only one deeper slot as shown, but it could have several. These deeper sections were probably caused by some type "sink-hole" or spring. A lake could have drained completely in the past (due to the sink-hole) and when filled again we have a slot or slots, *continued*

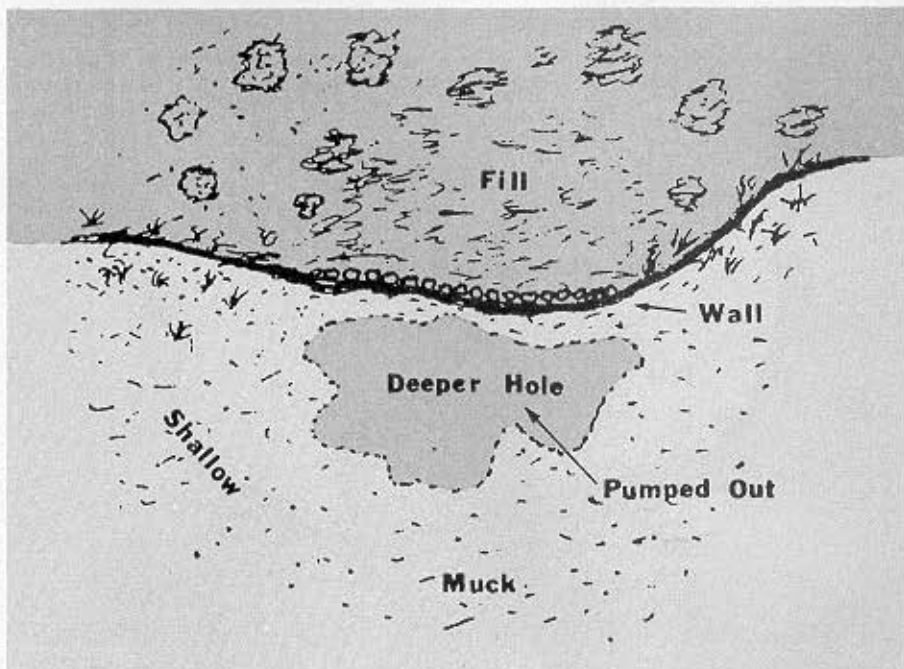


FIGURE 1—Top view of a portion of a shallow Florida lake. There are instances where a deeper section (hole) has been created by pumping water for irrigation or sand for a bathing beach. Bass fishermen should note such places carefully.

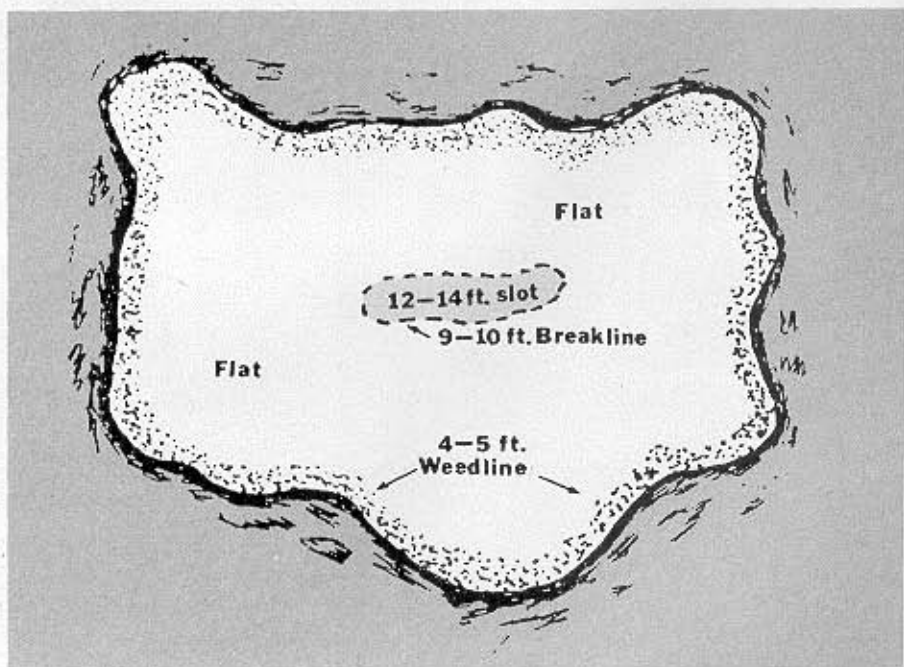


FIGURE 2—Conditions found in many Florida lakes. Most of the lake bottom is shallow and flat. It may have only one deeper slot as shown, but it could have several.

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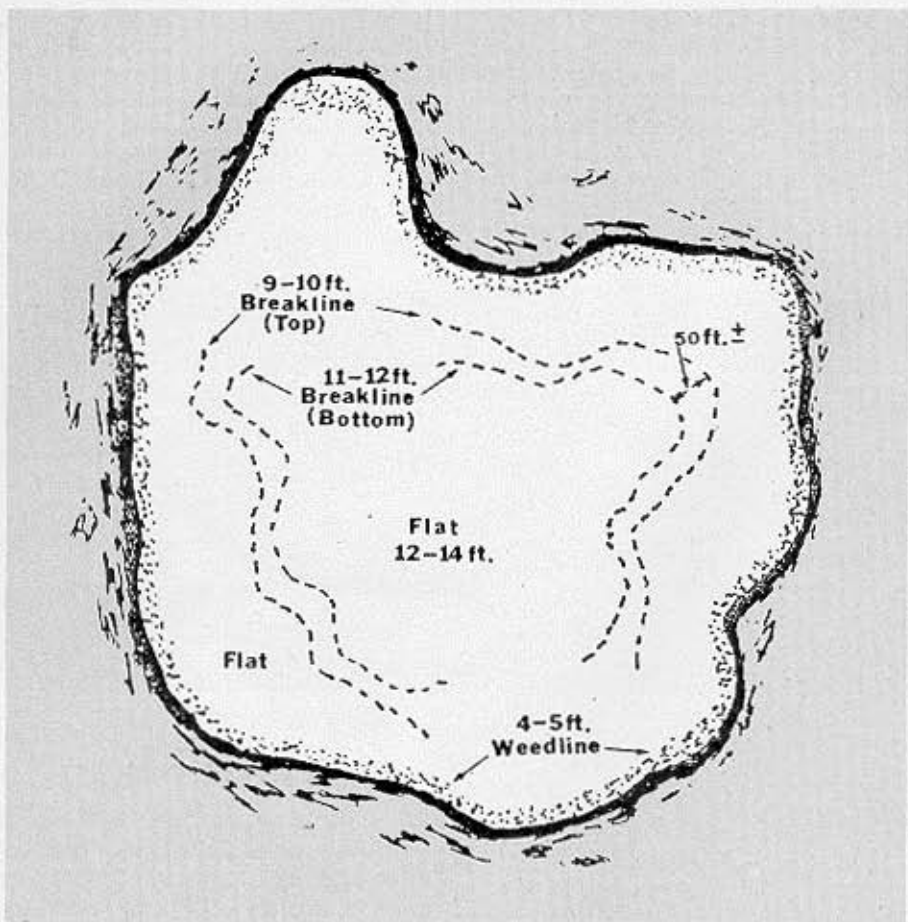


FIGURE 3—This lake type appears to be a great big "saucer-like" thing . . . a situation that can create some real problems for the average fisherman if the shallows fail to produce fish.



Jeri Wallace hoists two big bass that she caught after being shown what a good interpretation can mean to a beginner fisherman. Jeri's largest bass to date is a 10 pounder (shown).

with "breaklines." At times the breakline or drop-off around these deeper holes or slots can be rather sharp. Please note depths shown in Figure 2 carefully.

Suffice to say, the deeper holes and slots are our guides to where the fish will be found for most of the season, especially during bad fishing conditions. In the past and in our study material, we have talked about how to fish (how to present lures) in situations such as this—and as in Figure 1.

Figure 3 is a top view of a typical Florida lake. (I suggest you keep your eyeballs on this figure as we talk.) This type situation appears to be a great big "saucer-like" thing. The depths may change slightly, have a different shape, and there may be some slightly deeper water spots, but overall, this figure provides a satisfactory guideline when fishing Florida lakes—especially the larger ones. This type situation can create some problems for the average fisherman if the shallows do not produce—which they won't the majority of the time.

The shallow water vegetation normally does not go very deep—if you have chosen the right water color (preferably off-color or dingy) and the lake hasn't become infested with hydrilla, trash weeds, etc. In most lakes the weeds should "peter out" by the 4 or 5 foot depth. The bottoms are rather flat, in fact they are so flat we may have trouble finding where any breaklines or sudden depth changes exist; or just how they "break."

Normally, when talking about a breakline in a figure, I show just one breakline (this being the breakline where there exists a sudden or more rapid increase in depth) although there is normally a second breakline below this where there occurs a more rapid decrease in depth (going toward shallower water). In Figure 3, I have shown the two breaklines. One is the top of the "break" (more rapid increase in depth) and the other is the bottom (more rapid decrease in depth). The area beyond the "bottom" breakline is flat. As far as we are able to find out there is no deeper water (holes, slots, etc.) in the lake.

In many Florida lakes where a breakline exists there is usually only a gradual increase in depth from the top of the "break" (where it starts to break deeper—9 to 10 feet in the accompanying figure) to the bottom of the "break" (where the bottom flattens out again—11 to 12 feet in the figure), and the total increase in depth is small. In many instances, the total

increase in depth may be less than 2 feet over a distance of 50 feet or more. In some places the sudden increase in depth may be sharper but you have to be wide awake to note where it occurs. However, these "sharper breaks" are important KEYS to the fishable spots.

You should note I have indicated depths on the figure. For all practical purposes the depths shown will hold true for a great many Florida lakes. How far the 9-10 foot breakline (top) is from the shoreline will vary. In some lakes it can be a quarter mile from the weedline. The distance between the top of the break (9-10 ft.) to the bottom of the break (11-12 ft.) may be 50-100 feet (you have to check it out). We always hope we can find a deeper and sharper break but in most cases, it can't be found.

Figure 4 is a side view of our typical Florida lake (Figure 3). I am not adding a new Florida lake guideline. I'm combining the typical lake features (Figure 3) with the deeper slot features (Figures 1 & 2) in a side view. You should note I use the same depth figures. These depth figures could change slightly, but overall they are close enough. You also note we did not indicate a figure for the distance between the features of the bottom. These change from lake to lake, but we should not expect the distance between the different features to change very much in the same lake.

Our first job is to find out how and where the fish are moving. This means we must check out the shallows by casting or trolling. If we decide to go with trolling, we should first troll the weedline with the appropriate size lures. Then we would spend some time checking the depths between the weedline and the 9-10 foot breakline.

Without too much time lost (if we didn't make contact with the fish) we would proceed to work the breakline at the top of the "break" (9-10 ft.). If the bottom is hard, we should bump the bottom part of the time. However, we may be forced to eliminate the bumping lure entirely, as many times the bottom will be soft sand, mud, or muck, and the lure digs under this material and the fish are unable to get hold of it. Being unable to "bump" the lure creates problems getting "inactive" fish to strike—we may have to exercise patience for the fish to become active enough to take a free-swimming lure.

At times each trolling pass along the breakline can be quite long. After a few passes the length or section of the breakline to work may be set by the breakline "petering out," by the shape of the lake, or even by the wind.

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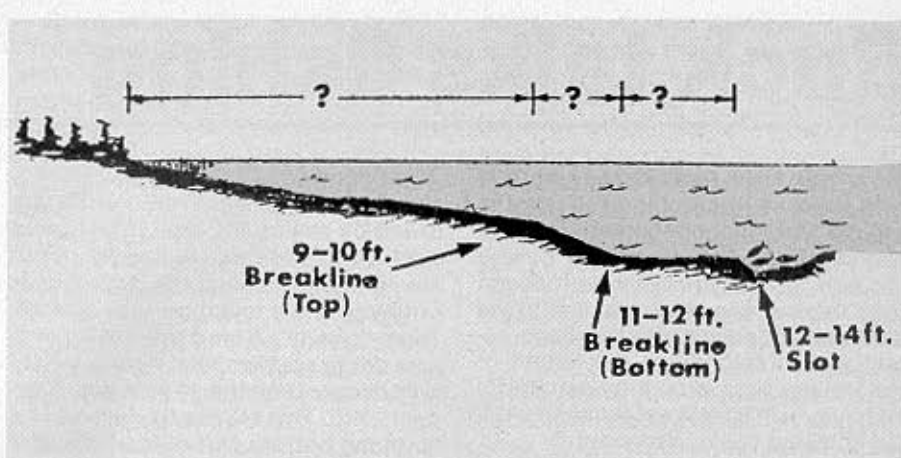


FIGURE 4 shows a small, deeper slot (12-14 ft. depth) on the flat beyond the deeper breakline. These areas should not be passed up, especially in bad weather when the fish are not migrating to shallower water.



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After you have familiarized yourself with the lake, the trolling run lengths will be established primarily *where you catch the fish*. In smaller bodies of water, you may find it wise for each pass to go all around the lake until the area that produces fish has been established. Establishing the length of the trolling pass is no big deal. Pretty soon you will have it established without thinking too much about it.

Since the "break" is so gradual and not well-defined, you may have difficulty following the breakline during a trolling pass. The best way to follow the breakline (with a depth meter) is to establish the depth where the breakline (top) occurs (9, 9½ or 10 ft.

in our drawing). With this established, say 9 feet, the breakline can be followed by easing the boat in until this depth (9 ft.) shows up on the depth sounder. *Slowly* head the boat deeper until you see a change—say 10 feet. Then "slowly" turn back until the 9 foot depth appears, etc. Again, *slowly* turn deeper until the 10 foot depth appears, etc. This means the lure will be bumping bottom part of the time, and running free part of the time (what we want). The *trolling pass* may look crooked as a snake, but never mind, the break is so minute and gradual, the lures will be in good position.

To follow the breakline and keep lures in position *without a depth*

sounder is not difficult either. With the proper lure size and line length you can establish where the "break" starts. You should get the lure bumping *lightly* on the flat, and head toward deeper water. When the lure runs free, a sudden or more rapid increase in depth has occurred. This is true, because a bottom *bumping* Spoonplug will keep walking "downhill" if the increase in depth remains constant. To follow the breakline with lures in position, you make the trolling pass just like you should when running the shoreline. That is, move in until the lure starts bumping, then *slowly* turn deeper until it runs free. Then *slowly* turn back, etc., etc. (I'll add more on the subject of trolling line length and lure sizes, etc. in just a moment.)

After the length of the breakline has been established and the 9-10 foot depth zone (breakline) has been worked thoroughly (several trolling passes while checking various speeds), then the slope of the break is worked with deeper running lures, with the concentration of effort at the "bottom" breakline (11-12 ft. depth). To keep lures in position, the trolling passes on the slope and at the deeper breakline will be made as we did at the "top" breakline (9-10 ft.)

Normally, with a medium size line (17 lb. test No-Bo Trolling Line) the top of the breakline can be checked with a 250 Series Spoonplug with a line length of 3 colors, or 80-90 feet, and 200 Series Spoonplug with a shorter line. A little practice will show just how much line is needed to obtain the right lure position. We can let out enough line to get the lure bumping, then quickly reel in enough line to get the lure barely skipping the high spots or slightly above the bottom.

In Figure 4 you will note we have a small, deeper slot (12-14 ft. depth) on the flat beyond the deeper breakline. At times there is a slightly "sharper break" here. In this case these areas cannot be passed up in bad weather, and when the fish are not migrating to shallower water. In this situation, if the shallows and breaklines do not produce over a period of time, we must present lures in this slightly deeper section, if present. (You check to see if it exists, but don't spend too much time out on that big flat, wandering around like a lost soul.) We choose lure size and line length to work it.

In all our trolling passes along these long breaklines (and the slope area between them) when contact is



"If you add these Florida lake guidelines to your regular Spoonplugger's guidelines, you'll have it made whenever or wherever you might fish; in that state and on smaller type waters."—Buck Perry

made with a fish, a floating marker should be thrown and the boat positioned (anchored) for checking the area by casting. Two style lures should be used in fan-casting to check out various lure speeds. For the faster speeds we will use a *sinking* free-running and bottom-bumping diving plug with a steady retrieve. For the slower speeds we will use a "jump type" lure (jig, soft plastic, spoon, etc.).

We should check out the faster speeds first. If additional fish are present, this will keep them in a competitive, fast action mood longer—thus more fish. If we start off casting a slow type lure (jump type) we may miss a lot of fish—they "cool" off. If the faster speed lure does not produce, then we cover the area with the slower jump type lure. If our "fan" casting efforts produce no additional fish, we resume our trolling runs. But, *we do not remove the floating marker.*

In Florida, as elsewhere, many live bait fishermen "soak" the shallows and the weedlines. Seldom do you see them using live bait in deeper water. This may be due to the fact that they don't know exactly where to put it. Let's take our situation (all figures, but especially Figure 3) for instance. Can you imagine what "slaughter" could be had on BIG bass if the breaklines were worked carefully with large "shiners" (shiner minnows) close to bottom?

One thing we must keep in mind at all times—fish do not move constantly or consistently. We must exercise patience, and repeat our presentation of lures until we make contact.

In many Florida lakes the breaklines can be so far from the shoreline, and so difficult to follow, it is wise to throw several markers. The markers should be placed where a fish has been caught and where a pronounced feature such as a finger, pocket, turn, or sharper break occurs. When placing the floating markers it is wise to put them so they are out of the way for trolling passes and casting positions. In most cases it is best to place them on the shallower side of the breaklines. Care must be taken to limit the amount of line between the floating marker and its anchoring weight. If the line is too long the floating marker may drift and get too far out of position. This creates problems we can all do without. Not only do we lose lure position, but we find ourselves hooking the marker line which causes the marker to be still farther out of position.

With markers in place, soon we will have the trolling passes down pat (depths, distance from markers, etc.). The markers will assist in anchoring the boat accurately for casting.


Quite often, when working a long breakline some distance from the shoreline, you will lose sight of your markers, especially during windy weather and during a glaring light condition. It may appear your floating markers have disappeared after you leave the area for awhile, or after making a wide turn.

Some fishermen may think they threw a marker at a certain depth, say 10 feet, and all they have to do to relocate it is to find the 10 foot depth. There are a lot of 10 foot spots in a lake and it is not likely your marker will be on the one chosen.

To be sure you can relocate your marker, it is important that you get at least one good shoreline sighting (two objects lined up on the same shoreline) for every marker thrown. By

doing this you can proceed in or out along one of these sightings and relocate the marker line.

Markers thrown on a long breakline allow us to spend our time where we have the best chance to catch a fish. If we do not throw markers on a breakline (such as this), we are not likely to keep our lures in position a greater part of the time. We are not likely to "learn" the lake if we try to work the breakline by methods other than markers and shoreline sightings.

If you add these few Florida lake guidelines to your regular Spoonplugger's (Structure Fisherman's) guidelines, as set forth in our Home Study Series, you'll have it "made" whenever or wherever you might fish, in that state and on similar type waters. 

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