What To Do When You Must Fish Deeper Water

by Buck Perry

In previous talks we discussed the things we have to learn in the presentation of lures. We said we had to learn how to cast and troll the shallows, how to cast and troll the deeper water, and how to go about our "on the water training."

Let us continue our thoughts with a "fish story" that occurred some years ago.

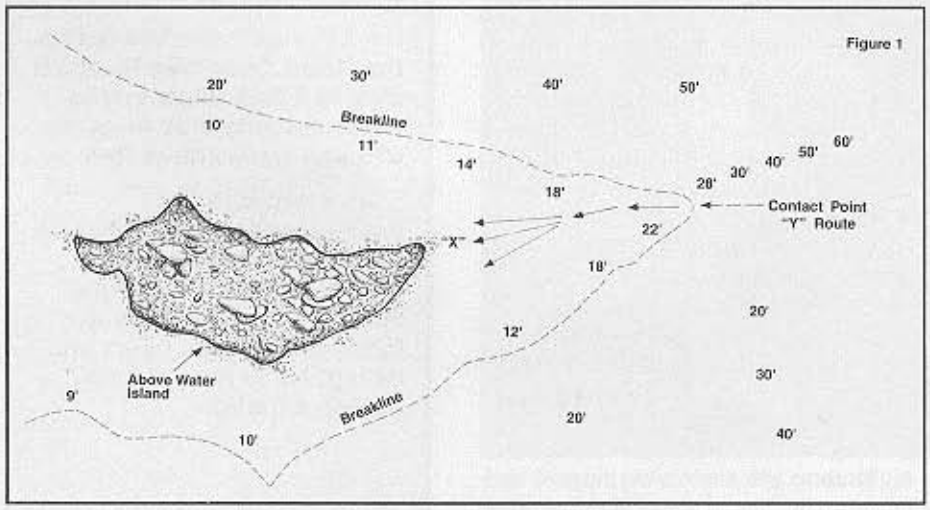
During the spring season, longtime friends Don Nichols, Connie Verges, and I took our wives to western Ontario, Canada. We planned to fish the Winnipeg River area with its many connected lakes and channels. The purpose was to be there during the spawning season of the smallmouth bass. We were all prepared to have a ball with fly rods and popping bugs.

When we arrived, we were told the warm weather had produced an early spawn. Reports indicated the smallmouth had moved away from the shallower spawning areas, and were back in the deeper portions of the channels and larger lakes. **It appeared we were in for a post-spawn period with very little fish movements and migrations.**

We were also told that the walleye and northern pike fishing was at a standstill. The period, plus weather condition, had all the fish inactive and very difficult to catch. Most guide boats were traveling up to 20 miles each day trying to find some fish. The results were hardly worth the effort. Only a few small walleyes were counted among the 20 to 25 boats that left the dock daily. The message was loud and clear--**we should have been here earlier.**

We spent quite some time the first day checking out areas that had produced for us in the past when the smallmouth were bedding. In short order, it became apparent we had arrived entirely too late for fly-rod and popping-bug fishing. The situation suggested to us that if any appreciable movement of fish occurred, it was likely to occur very early in the morning, and in all probability, would be the only shallow movement during the entire day. Additionally, if any early morning activity occurred, it would likely be for only a short period of time.

Don volunteered to check out some spots in the deeper lakes and channels at daybreak the following morning. These spots (**"Structure Situations" -- features of the bottom the fish use in their movements and migrations**) were known to be productive from previous trips. At breakfast he reported the fish moved about an hour after the break



of day, and the duration of the movement was approximately 30 minutes.

Not only did this report give me the creeps, but the wives let it be known (in no uncertain terms) they weren't about to get up in the middle of the night to catch fish for 30 minutes. We were told, "You guys have gotta do better than that!"

The next morning at daylight, Don and I were anchored on a "structure situation" that had been mapped, interpreted and fished previous to this trip. The spot had features that would definitely show us the movement pattern of the fish, if and when it occurred. The area was about a 15-minute run (by boat) from the dock. In order to reach it, we had to cross some big "open" water. Fortunately there was no wind or wave action, but we noted the fact the great expanse of water could become a problem at times, especially with the fishing partners we had on this trip.

Figure 1 is a top view of the area we were fishing. The "Structure Situation" (underwater bar and the breakline) was located off a small, rocky (above water) island. It was quite a distance away from the main shorelines. The shallowest water contained some vegetation, but most all the area had a clean, hard, rocky bottom. The major breakline and depths off the island were approximately as shown. We were anchored in water about 6 feet deep–position "X" as indicated in the figure.

Our interpretations and previous experience had revealed the approximate "contact point" (the place where the fish first contact the "structure situation" in their movement from deeper water), and also the route they took toward shallower water. They would come up on the bar, and breakline, at position "Y" (22 feet) and move up along the breakline before scattering into shallow water. Most of the scatterings would be in the area where the boat was anchored.

It was decided Don would use ultralight gear and small jigs and work the shallows all the way to depths of 6 to 8 feet. I would handle heavier casting gear using free-swimming, bottom-bumping lures and heavy jump type lures to check the faster speeds and deeper depths.

We covered the whole areas around the boat thoroughly, but no contact was made with any species. This didn't bother us, as we were probably there ahead of time (as per Don's experience the previous day). We were also hoping the movement pattern had changed so we would not get such a short, early movement. Probably, if the time of movement changed, we would also get a longer period of activity.

By using a heavy jig and long cast, I was able to reach position "Y" (the drop-off). Don was unable to reach this spot with the gear he was using at the time. The light lures he was working would not have allowed good depth and speed control in the deeper water even if he had been able to cast that far.

We continued to work all around the boat, and periodically I would snap on one of the heavier jigs and make a long cast to the "contact point" (22 feet–position "Y"). About an hour after we had arrived, I made a long cast to the deep water beyond position "Y" (drop-off – contact point) and as the lure came "jumping" over the breakline, a good fish lapped it up. It proved to be an 8 lb. northern pike.

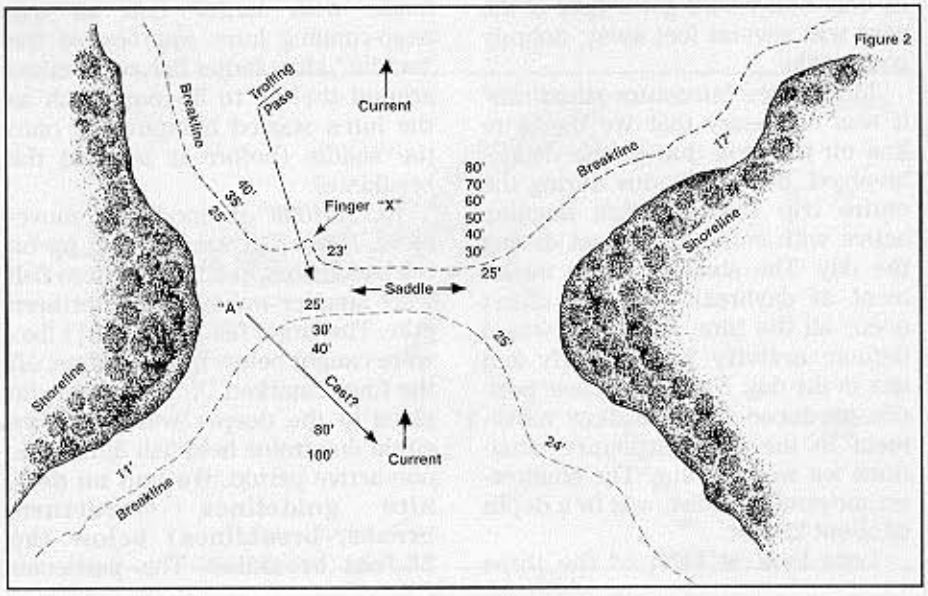
Don switched rods, and we both directed our casts toward the spot. We caught two more fish, one a walleye and the other a northern pike. Both of these fish were well along the breakline toward shallower water when they struck. By the time we removed them from the lures, additional fish were all around the boat. Don switched back to the ultralight, and we both caught fish about as fast as we could cast. Don was knocking them up to 9 lbs. (walleyes and northern pike) on the ultralight, and I was doing the same with the heavier free-running, bottom-bumping lures. The color, size, and action of the lures made little difference, but the depth control had to be fairly accurate, being on, or as close to the bottom as possible (both "jump type" and "free-running" lures).

During this action we had either a smallmouth, walleye or northern pike on the line most of the time. But, it wasn't long before we noticed the fish were moving back downstairs. The last fish was caught on a heavy jig on the long cast to the "contact point" (position "Y", Figure 1). Then the action was over. We checked our watches and found the total time of the movement (up on structure) had lasted for approximately 25 minutes –about the same period of time Don had experienced the previous morning.

Our report to the wives did not make them jump for joy.

The situation demanded we find the fish in deeper water. The movement pattern told us the spots to fish ("Structure Situations") should be near the average sanctuary depths (30-35 feet). The unfavorable weather outlook also told us these spots should be near the boat dock. If found close to the dock, it would allow us (if weather conditions permitted) to take our wives out for a short spell after breakfast and again after dinner if they so desired.

We were able to locate three "Structure Situations" less than a mile from the dock. One was only a couple blocks from the ramp; another 1/2 mile; the other approximately



3/4 of a mile. The "**contact point**" to one "structure situation" was 25 feet deep, one at 30 feet and the third one at 33 feet. The productivity of each was different; the shallowest being the poorest, and the deepest being the best. The size of the fish varied, but the larger fish were caught in the deepest water.

The main thing that produced the fish was "exact" depth control (where the fish would be). Most of the fish were caught on a free-swimming lure, but only an instant before the lure started bumping bottom, or directly after it came bumping off the "contact points."

The area being fished was where the Winnipeg Flowage narrows. This condition created quite a heavy current at all three "structure situations." The best control could be obtained on the troll. Trolling against the current (going upstream) gave the best control. However, in this case, since the speed control (how fast the lure moved through the water) wasn't too critical, we could catch some fish going downstream as well.

Due to the depths and the current, it was very difficult to position the boat properly to have much success on the cast. One cast out of 10 might reach the correct position. However, with proper shoreline sightings (making our trolling passes in relationship to visible objects on shore) and with the aid of a depth sounder, a trolling pass could be made "right on the money." Normally, when two people were in the boat, both would get a fish if the pass was exact. However, if the pass was "off" slightly, only one would get a fish. If the pass was several feet away, nobody got a strike.

In all three "structure situations" it was necessary that we use wire line on the troll due to the depths involved. It was obvious during the entire trip that the fish became active with some movement during the day. The shallow water movement at daybreak probably didn't occur all the time, but there was a definite **activity period** early and late in the day. Neither of these periods produced much shallow movement in the three structure situations we were fishing. The shallowest movement of fish was to a depth of about 25 feet.

Let's look at each of the three "structure situations" and see why one was better than the other, or produced more and bigger fish. At the same time note carefully why trolling was better than casting and why certain lure types had to be used to get proper depth and speed control.

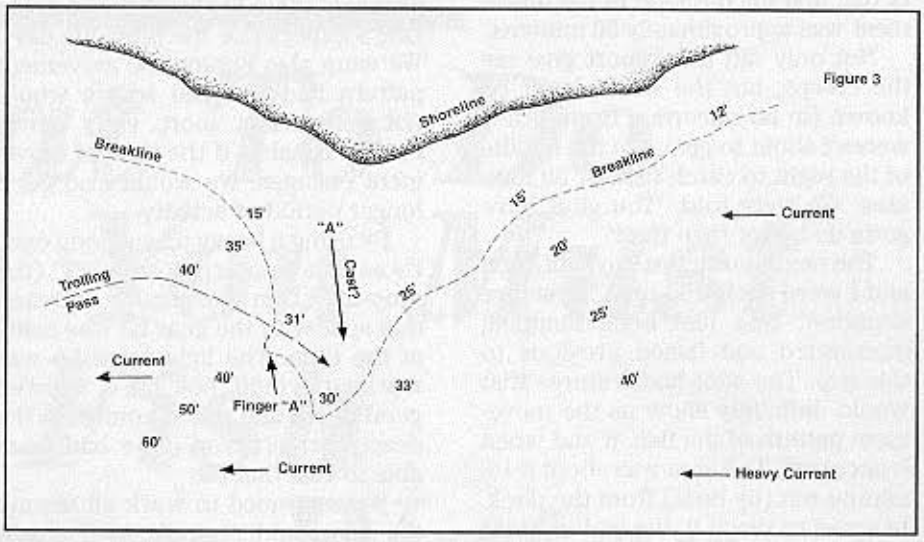


Figure 3

Figure 2 is a top view of one situation (note direction of current). Shown is where a main channel is running between two large islands. There exists a 25 foot "saddle" between the two shorelines (islands). (Note the shape and depths in the area.)

The current here was very strong, and proper presentation of lures on the cast was next to impossible. The "contact point" of the fish moving to the "saddle" appeared to be a small finger (projection) marked "X" in the figure. This was established by the fact this was where contact was made with larger fish as our deep-running lures *approached* the "saddle." Most larger fish were taken around the 30- to 35-foot depth as the lures started bumping up onto the saddle (before it reached the breakline).

At periods of good fish movement, some fish were caught up on the saddle, but in all cases these fish were smaller walleyes and northern pike. The larger fish, from 6 to11 lbs., were caught below the breakline, off the finger marked "X." There was no place in the deeper water that we could determine held fish during the non-active period. **We had no definite guidelines (structure, breaks, breaklines) below the 25-foot breakline**. This particular fishing area was not the best, due to the fact we had to wait for a movement to occur before we made contact with many fish.

Look at Figure 2 again (again, note current direction). Imagine you are trying to cast the area effectively. Let's suppose you position your boat at position "A." First you desire to check the top of the "saddle." What type lure would you use? It is obvious it would have to be some heavy "jump" type lure, (such as a heavy jig). If you were to cast toward the "saddle," the heavy current would have the lure in 80 feet of water before it had sunk to 25 feet. If you were to cast downstream and then worked the jig up against the heavy current, the lure would seldom be near the saddle upon completion of the retrieve. The only way to hit the saddle would be to cast upstream and "hope" your lure was on the saddle by the time it had sunk to 25 feet. As indicated earlier, maybe one out of ten casts would place the lure on the saddle. Even in this case, the current would sweep the lure out of position after a couple jumps.

If we had used extra heavy jigs (1 1/2 to 2 oz.) we might have been able to partially work the "finger" (position "X"), but here again, the current would have produced sloppy depth and speed control.

Trolling the area effectively presented no problems and accurate depth and speed control could be maintained. To secure the depths, wire line and appropriate size lures (Spoonplugs) allowed us to check the area easily.

This particular area produced

some fine fish, but they had to be active and moving toward the (shallow) saddle. But this movement did not occur *all the time.*

Figure 3 is a top view of the second productive area. Again, it was an area with a fairly strong current (note current direction). The "contact point" to the rocky underwater bar was on the downstream side at position "X." Here again, many of the bigger fish were not on the bar or breakline during a non-movement period. However, due to the depth (30 feet) there were quite a few stragglers present throughout the day. The overall size of the fish here was larger than those on the 25-foot depth (Figure 2).

Here again, it was very difficult to present lures properly on the cast. By putting the boat at position "A," about one out of ten casts could be made effectivly with a heavy (1 to 2 oz.) jig. The cast had to be made upstream, and if gauged accurately enough, it would hit the "bar" by the time it had sunk to the bottom. However, before the lure could work much of the area, the current swept the jig off into deeper water below the bar. Not only was this difficult casting, but it was only effective when quite a few fish made contact during the activity period–which only occurred early and late in the day (for short periods of time). Positioning the boat upstream, and making casts downstream, made it even more difficult to obtain proper depth and speed control.

At this point, let me explain again what is meant by "depth and speed control." **Depth Control** means **"where the fish will be." Speed Control** means **"how fast the lure moves through the water,"** which means **how you and I get the fish to take the lure.** The depth and speed must work together **at the same time.** We can't sacrifice one to get the other. The tool, **Spoonplug,** maintains depth control with a change in speed.

Trolling large Spoonplugs with wire line presented an entirely different picture. Since the speed factor was not critical, the bar could be worked from both directions. But the best control (depth, speed) could be maintained while trolling against the current. An effective trolling pass downstream was difficult to make due to the current. Quite often the boat and the lure got out of position. However, by making a **swinging turn** behind the bar on the upstream pass (note Figure 3), the inside "contact point" could be hit and the lure would walk up and over the bar. This type presentation not only caught fish in quantity and quality during the activity periods, but it provided excellent "straggler" fishing throughout the day. Most all the fish were caught below 25 feet.

Figure 4 is a top view of the third and best spot (note current direction). This particular shoreline area (structure, breaks, breaklines, deep water) was in a wider portion of the river (connecting lakes) and on one side it had two breaklines into deep water. A heavy current was present in the channel. This particular "structure situation" was found by Don the year before when the weather turned sour and sent all the fish to deep water for an extended stay.

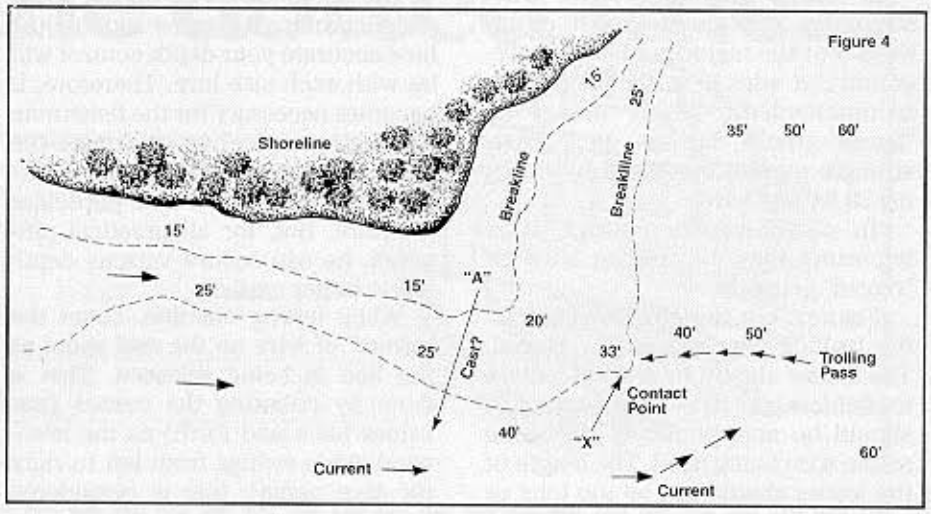
The "contact point" was at position "X" (Figure 4). Not only was it the contact point, but for most of the time we were there, it was near the area of the deep-water sanctuary. Very seldom would a trolling pass be made at the turn in the breakline (position "X") without a fish being taken (if lures were in correct position). The structure was not well defined such as a ridge-like bar, but the "breakline" (drop-off) was, and the "sharper break" (more rapid increase or decrease in depth) occurred at position "X." The "contact point" stood out like a sore thumb. Very few fish migrated toward the 15- or 20-foot breaklines (Figure 4). Most all of the movement towards the shallows occurred along the breakline going upstream. Movements along this breakline only occurred to some degree during the activity periods (early and late). Very few fish moved shallower than 25 feet along the breakline during our stay.

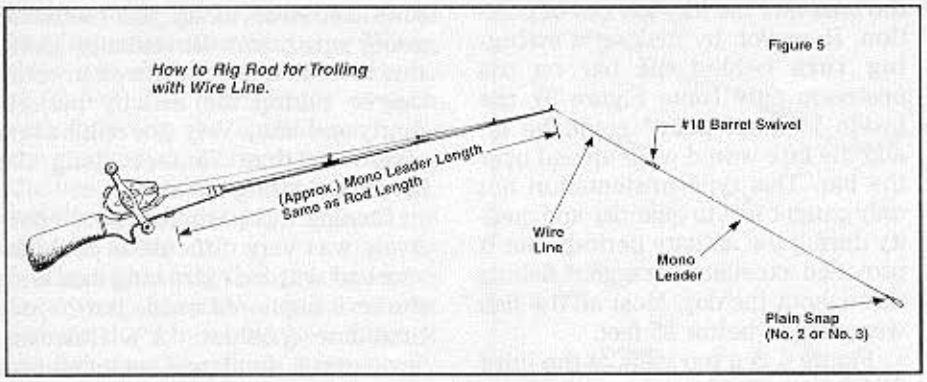
Casting this particular spot effectively was very difficult. It could be reached with an extra long cast with the boat anchored inside the 20-foot breakline (position "A"). However, the current, depth and rocky bottom made anchoring next to impossible. If the anchor held for any length of time (approximately 60 feet of anchor rope out, and a wind anchor at that) the casts could be made upstream, but it was a guessing game as to where the lure would be when it hit the bottom.

However, by using wire line on the troll with appropriate lure sizes (Spoonplug) to check the depths and the speeds (at the same time) and by using "exact" shoreline sightings for the trolling pass, you could win a bet a fish (or a double) would be caught on the ***first*** pass.

Did we locate the fish and catch them by using things such as temperature, oxygen, food, size, color, action, fancy rigs, stick-ups, running 20 miles? What actually did we do? Where were our efforts directed? Wonder how much fun and satisfaction we would have had if we had not learned to troll, or refused to do so, or didn't want to? We had learned early in our fishing career that TROLLING was our teacher. It told us where, when, what and how to cast.

We had no trouble seeing what type fishing trip we would have had





if we had not used structure, breaks, breaklines and deep water as our guide, then used our "tools" to control the depth and speed of our lures.

Many fishermen ask: "How do you use wire line?" "Where can I get the proper wire?"

There are three basic, weighted lines sold for securing extra depths. The three types are: lead-core line, stranded wire and solid (single-strand) wire. We have found solid single-strand wire desirable over the other two. With proper diameters and proper flexibility, the solid wire gives good depth control and is easy to use after brief instruction and experience.

One hundred (100) yards of wire is normally all that is required on the reel. This amount doesn't normally fill the reel, therefore a "backing" should be used (under the wire) to nearly fill the reel spool. The backing should be a good trolling monofilament, such as NO-BO Trolling Line. If and when all the wire runs off the reel, the fisherman is still in business. Quite often some wire will be lost, and the nylon trolling line (NO-BO) can be used along with the wire in trolling.

In most fishing, two wire strengths will handle most situations. For the majority of cases a 17-pound-test wire is sufficient (and is recommended). Where numerous "hangs" (rocks, bushes, etc.) exist, strength can be increased by utilizing 20 lb. test wire.

To obtain proper control, it is important that the trolling wire be "rigged" properly.

Figure 5 is a sketch, showing how the trolling wire **should** be rigged. The leader should be a good quality monofilament. The test (strength) should be approximately the same as the wire being used. The length of the leader should not be too long or too short. A good guideline to follow is to cut the leader the length (or distance) from the front of the reel (level wind) to the tip of the trolling rod. During hard use, some of this leader will be lost (frayed, etc.) and when it gets down to about two feet in length, it should be replaced with a new leader.

A small barrel swivel should be used to connect the wire line and the monofilament leader. A #10 size will normally move down through the rod guides (a must) without too much trouble.

A plain #2 or a #3 Snap should be used at the end of the leader for attaching (or changing) lures.

A good guideline to follow (especially when using Spoonplugs) is the wire will obtain double the depth attaind with monofilament line (nylon) with the same amount of line released. For example, if a medium-length wire (30 - 40 yds.) is run with a 200 series Spoonplug, the lure should reach 18 to 24 feet in depth. The normal running depth of this size lure with nylon monofilament is 9 to 12 feet. If a long to extra-length wire (60-70 yds.) is run, it should get the bottom bumping close to 30 feet.

The amount of wire on the spool will determine to some extent just how accurate your depth control will be with each size lure. Therefore, it becomes necessary for the fisherman (through practice) to determine the exact amount of line to reach a specific spot or depth with a particular size lure. But, for all practical purposes, he can secure various depth levels rather easily.

When letting out line, count the "layers" of wire on the reel spool as the line is being released. This is done by counting the passes (traverses back and forth) as the level-wind guide swings from left to right (or vice versa); this is considered one layer of wire. In counting, it is easier to count the number of layers by noting the return of the level-wind guide to the original position (two layers of wire). The count will go 2, 4, 6, 8, etc.

Fourteen to sixteen layers should provide a medium to long line. Twenty-two to twenty-four layers of wire should give a long to extra-long line.

An important thing to keep in mind when trolling wire,is not to have too much wire line out for the depths being worked. If too much line is released behind the boat, control is lost, as well as lures.

In most all cases, when working deep water the "bottom" is our guide. We want the lure on, or as close to the bottom as possible (regardless of depth, lure size or line length). **We want JUST ENOUGH wire let out to reach the desired depths (or bottom).**

For instance, lets say you desire to hit a particular spot at 23 feet. A lure is chosen (Spoonplug) that nomally runs from 12 to 14 feet in depth with monofilament line (NO-BO). A 100 or 200 series Spoonplug, will do the job.

Fourteen to sixteen layers of wire are released at a fairly fast clip of the boat. When the wire length is out, the boat is slowed to a CRAWL. The extremely slow forward motion is maintained UNTIL THE LINE SINKS AND THE LURE MAKES CONTACT WITH THE BOTTOM. At the **first bump** , the throttle is advanced to a trolling speed. This gives the desired (or exact) amount of wire in the water. DO NOT STOP the boat completely in order to let the lure and line sink. If the boat is stopped, it is not likely the correct length of line (for the depth being worked) is released. Usually a few seconds wait with the **slow crawl** is all that is needed to have the lure and line down correctly. Slight adjustments of line length can be made if the situation calls for it. If the wait becomes too long, adjust the line length slightly, or switch to a larger, deeper-running lure.

The only time the boat is ever stopped completely in letting the line and lure sink, is when reaching extra depths (50 to 100 feet).

Never fear regarding "feel" while running long or extra-long lengths of wire. Regardless of the amount of

wire in the water, the feel is still there and every little bump or wiggle can be felt. A striking fish can jar the bones.

A word of caution: When the lure "hangs" DO NOT attempt to throw back loose wire in order to free the lure. Loose wire in the air can create a kink, and subsequent pressure may cause the line to break. When handled right, wire line will last a long time. Any breakage should occur in the monofilament leader normally in the knot at the snap.

At times, all who troll should practice securing depth control with wire. With practice, greater depth control can be had with wire than with monofilament. Many times extra depths will be required with a **short line** (such as running a tall weedline, or when following a crooked shoreline). With wire, a minimum length of line can be used **to reach depths with smaller lures**, etc. (500, 400 and 250 series Spoonplugs).

The use of wire line on the troll opens up a completely new ball game as far as fishing is concerned. Those deep clear lakes will present fewer problems, and the many cold fronts will create less fear. Again, the only excuse we have for failure is, we do not know enough yet, or we are not good enough yet.

When we move into deeper water, our presentation (both casting and trolling) should be "pinpointed." In deeper water we must concentrate our efforts exactly where the fish will be. However, if we have a specific "spot" we are shooting at, proper control is not overly difficult to obtain. We compensate for error by fan casting. We use maps, floating markers, shoreline sightings, depth sounders, trolled lures, or anything else to pinpoint the spot. **This is where your knowledge of mapping, interpretation, and presentation of lures becomes so important.**

We can assume that when the fish are shallower than 20 feet (when deeper water is available) lure presentation does not have to be quite so exact. But, when the fish are deeper (somewhere in the sanctuary depths), our interpretations and presentations must be exact; the deeper we go the more exact (and difficult) it becomes. If you and I can't interpret the spot where the fish will be, or if we are unable to control the depth and speed of our lures at that spot, we have no business spending much time in deep water. It would be a far wiser course to wait for the fish to come to us. However, the "wait" could be for a long period of time. It is best to learn how to interpret deep features and learn deep presentation of lures. It is not all that difficult.

Editor's Note: *October 8 - 11, 1997, Spoonpluggers (structure fishermen) from all over the country will gather in Chattanooga, Tennessee for the 8th Annual National Spoonpluggers' Jamboree. Come join the many fihermen who follow the principles of E.L. "Buck" Perry, the Father of Structure Fishing, for hours of classroom education, on-the-water help and general fellowship. For more information, contact Spoonpluggers of America, ph: 704/328-6781.*