

WORK THE RIGHT PLACES AT THE RIGHT TIME

Fishermen should look at all structure from a seasonal standpoint.

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The winter season can be tough for many fishermen. Under colder or early season fishing conditions, anglers often forget that fishing can be quite different from that experienced last summer.

In the study of structure, weather and water conditions, we normally think in terms of a *daily* observation. This is necessary – even essential. After all, we are interested in the conditions that exist the day we go fishing.

But when we consider the many varied weather and water conditions that exist throughout the season, and the many different types of structure to be found in lakes, we are faced with the fact that if we want to fish the most productive structures at all times, we'd better look at structure from a *seasonal* standpoint. In other words – *are we on the best structure for this time of year?*

Most natural lakes, and especially those of small acreage, do not have as many types of structure as do reservoirs (man-made lakes). In natural lakes, the deep water is normally in the form of a hole rather than a channel. This hole or deep water may be limited in size and may be located in only one relatively small area of the lake.

In natural lakes, the bottom contour is quite predictable and more uniform, lacking the abrupt changes of a reservoir. The deep water consists of a hole or holes, most structure is in the form of "bars" which run out from the shoreline, and some lakes may have humps or underwater islands. If you cross the lake from side to side, in most cases there is not a great deal of change in structure types. The depths may vary to some degree, but overall, fishermen would not be too concerned with which good structure they should fish, regardless of the time of year.

That is not the case when we consider reservoirs (man-made lakes). Here we must consider structure from the seasonal point of view if we want to fish the most



Many anglers make the majority of their catches in the shallows in the spring, when the fish are most vulnerable. They then spend the rest of the year fishing the same places where they caught fish successfully in the spring – and the rest of the year they wonder why they're not catching fish. In this article, Education Editor Buck Perry (above) tells you why.

productive ones. Reservoirs have a multitude of different types of structures, such as steep shores, flats, long bars, river and feeder-stream channels, coves, bays, deltas, underwater islands, humps, etc. They also contain many man-made structures such as submerged roadbeds, causeways, dams, and borrow pits. All of this means that in some parts of a reservoir the structure may, or will be, completely different from that in another part of the reservoir. It also means that this can be true not only from the lower end compared to the upper end, but even just a short hop across the channel.

This article will focus primarily on large-

mouth bass, but **it would be wise to view all species in light of the following information.** In order for us to arrive at the best structure from a seasonal point of view, let's review some of the basic migration habits of fish.

RESERVOIRS

Figure 1 is a cross section of a typical reservoir. There will be areas with long, sloping bottoms with long structures, a channel of some type, and areas that have steep, short structure with a quick drop-off into deep water.

The fish in the channel are in a typical winter or colder-season position. During these colder parts of the season (late fall, winter and early spring), there will be short, scattered migrations from the deep channel towards the steep shoreline and short structures. This provides the shortest route to the shallows for a limited, scattered migration, and provides immediate access back to deep water.

In the warmer part of the season (late spring, summer or early fall) the movements of the fish will be toward the longer routes and flatter structures.

The fish is a cold-blooded creature, and its activity, movements, growth, digestion and all other functions, will change with the season. **Figure 1** depicts the picture you should have in mind for the seasonal migration of fish. With this in mind, let's proceed to the question of locating the best structure on a seasonal basis.

Figure 2 focuses on a particular section of a reservoir, showing where the original river channel made a swing or bend. The flow of water was from the left to right. In studying this sketch, note three sections: (1) the "inside" of the curve has produced a wide, flat area with long, flatter structures; (2) the "outside" of the bend in the channel has produced a steeper, deeper section close to shore with short, deep structure; (3) the feeder stream has produced a "cove" or bays with varied bottom conditions and short structure.

Let's assume that fishing the longer, flatter structures (A, B, C and D) during the past summer was productive, but when these areas were checked in the colder part of the season, little success was achieved. What is the reason for this?

During the colder period, structures A, B, C and D should be checked because at times they may yield a fish or two. In some areas fishermen use high-speed boats to run from one end of the lake to another, checking and rechecking these longer, warmer-season structures without giving any thought to other areas that might be more productive. The weather and water conditions would have to be very cooperative to produce a nice catch of fish on these structures during this early or colder part of the season, and the short, scattered movements which these areas might produce would easily be missed. After a short check of structures A, B, C, and D, fishermen should move to the other types of structure in the area (see **Figure 2**).

With **Figure 1** still in mind, the first section a fisherman should check is along the deep, steep shoreline. The first casting or trolling pass might not produce a single fish, or it could produce a "loner" fish - quite normal for this part of the season. Several additional passes could be made before another fish is caught. Then a subsequent pass could produce a limit catch. A fisherman should consider himself very lucky if

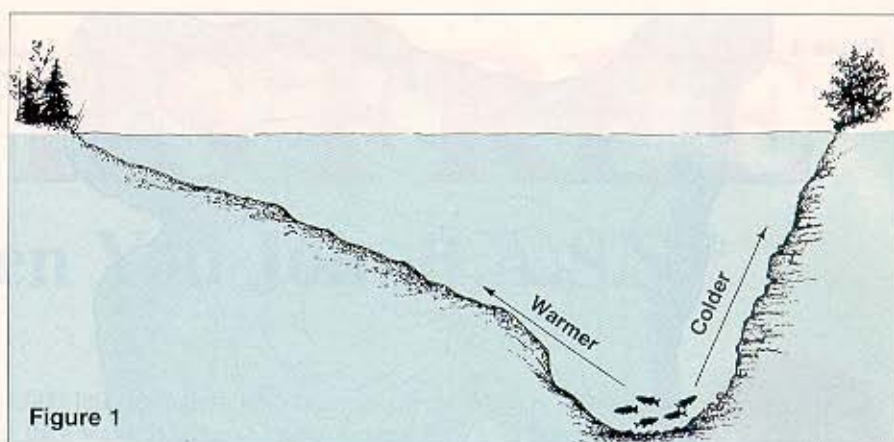


Figure 1

Cross-section view of a reservoir. The fish in the channel are shown in their typical winter or colder-season position. During the colder parts of the season (late fall, winter and early spring), there will be short, scattered migrations from the deep channel towards the steep shoreline and short structures.

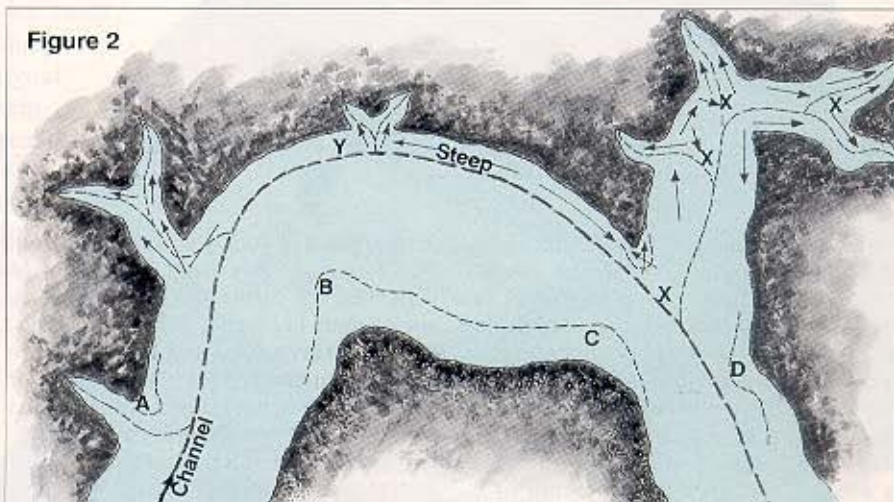


Figure 2

A section of a reservoir showing where the river channel made a swing or bend. Let's assume that the long, flatter bottom structures (areas A, B, C & D) during the past summer were productive, but when these areas were checked in the colder part of the season, little fishing success was achieved. Do you know the reason for this lack of success?

he finds a large number of fish moving at any one time.

The next area to check would be the feeder streams and coves found off the deeper sections. When weather and water conditions are good, the fish will sometimes move into the channel of feeder streams, and from there they will migrate into the shallows. This is especially true if the water color is different from that of the main body of water. The short bars found in the coves can, at times, be highly productive in the colder part of the season.

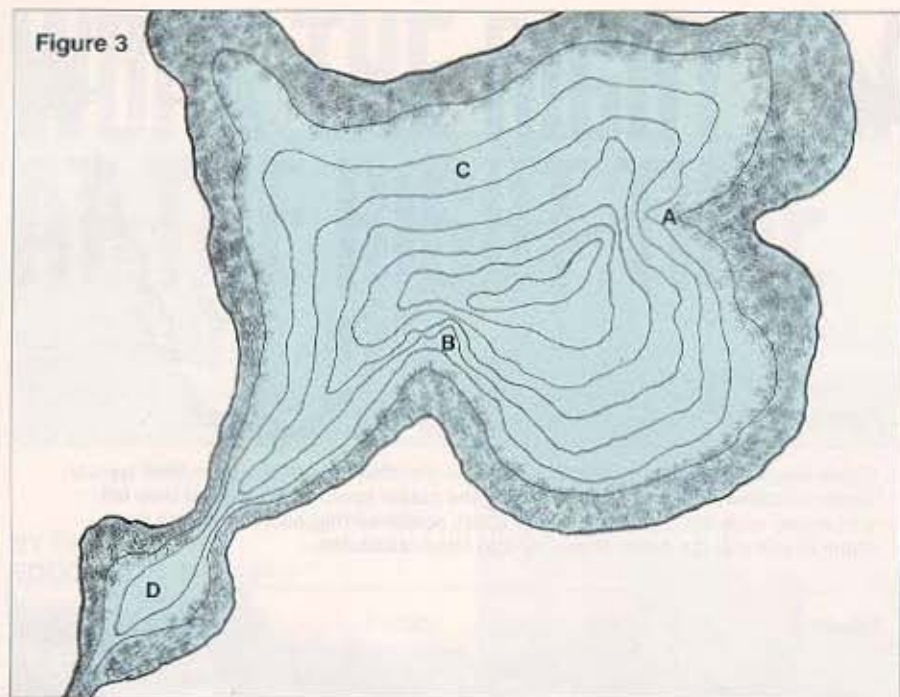
The migration of fish from the main channel into the feeder-stream channels is the reason why many fishermen score in bays and coves early in the season. These areas must be checked by trolling or casting. Casting, however, allows this area to be checked more thoroughly. A troller could check some of the breaks (marked "X") without too much trouble, but he would have trouble keeping his lures in

position in the small bays and congested areas. Casting, as indicated by the small arrows, would be more effective and would provide better coverage.

There are several things that should be kept in mind when fishing these areas in colder or early seasons: (1) fish migration is mostly spotty; (2) when a productive area has been found, considerable time should be spent working it over thoroughly; (3) if a particular area, such as a small bay off a steep shoreline (as in "Y"), has proven productive, other spots of similar nature should be looked for and tested. This holds true for any area found to be productive at this particular time.

Early season success in these areas can be poor for the average fisherman! He will spend too much time in these areas later on in the season, never realizing what has happened to his good fishing. He will have to wait until the early season returns to once again have any appreciable success.

Figure 3



Top view of a natural lake. The seasonal migration of fish in natural lakes is somewhat different from that found in reservoirs.

Finally, it's important to note that when working coves and bays in the cooler season (see **Figure 2**), a good rule to follow is to pick the coves and bays that are closest to the deepest water in the area (channel). **Do not spend time in bays and coves which do not contain some sort of channel or feeder stream.** In other words, if a cove or bay is a wide, flat area with no sign of a channel, ignore it.

SEASONAL MOVEMENTS

To apply the seasonal movements of bass to fishing in a reservoir, concentrate first on the steeper shorelines with the steep, short structures during the colder weather of the early season. As the season moves toward the pre-spawn, check the steeper shores less and focus attention on coves, bays and short bars in these areas. These coves or bays, with their shorter structures, should be worked heavily during the spawning season. After the spawning season, leave the steep shoreline, most of the coves and bays, and direct your attention to the longer, flatter structures in the main body of the reservoir. In other words, the spawning season is the dividing line between the steeper, shorter, cold-weather structures and the flatter, longer, warm-weather structures. In late fall, head back toward the cold-weather structure.

NATURAL LAKES

Figure 3 shows a top view of a natural lake. The seasonal migration of fish in

natural lakes is somewhat different from that found in reservoirs. This is not to imply that the habits and instincts of fish are different, but that in most natural lakes, **the structures used remain the same throughout the season.** (It's possible for a natural lake to have the same features as a reservoir – short structure, steep shoreline, etc. Some natural-lake chains, with a stream flowing through them, and some wider sections of streams often have features found in reservoirs. In this case, the seasonal-migration principle would apply.)

Figure 3 shows the contour and structure available in a natural lake. Added to this structure is a shallow channel or slough leading off to a small expanse of water. This could be a small, shallow lake connected to the main lake by a narrow channel.


The deepest water in the lake is a large section in the center of the larger body of water – the home of the fish during winter or summer. There are two main structures in the form of bars (A & B). The section marked "C" has a flat, sloping bottom with no well-defined structure, breakline or breaks. The breaklines that occur on structures "A" and "B" are the only "steep" bottoms available. Thus, they would be the shortest route to shallower water for limited or scattered migrations – just like the steeper sections of a reservoir. These provide fish with immediate access to the deepest water. Thus, in the early and pre-spawn seasons, these steeper sections of the structure would be used by the fish.

As the pre-spawn season approaches, it is likely that during certain weather and water conditions, some fish may migrate briefly into the feeder channel leading to the

backwaters of the slough or small, shallow lake. The possibility of this increases as the spawning season approaches.

In the overall picture, two main structures (A & B) should be considered as the main migration routes during both the cold and warm seasons. In the colder pre-spawn period, the deeper breaks and breaklines would receive the short, scattered, unpredictable migrations. As the season progresses, the movements should become lengthier, and be more to the shallow portions of the structures. During the spawning season, the most productive places in the lake should be in the near shallows of these two main structures. If the lake has a slough or a small channel leading off into a bay, or a small section such as area "D," then this too should be checked. After the spawning season, the same main structures (A & B) would receive the migration, depending on the prevailing weather and water conditions.

The pre-spawn and spawning seasons are periods of changing weather and water conditions! Fish *react* to these changes just as they do during any other part of the season! A good rule to follow during this period is: the closer the spawning season, the more fish can be *expected* in the shallows. Be happy when this occurs, but remember that one trip may be good and the next bad, and even one year might be good and the next bad.

Regardless of the time of year, the weather and water conditions, or how short and slow the fish movement might be, your best chance of catching fish is by fishing the most potentially productive water. *You and I will never catch fish by fishing where they ain't!* 

ONE FINAL THOUGHT

Too often, during the pre-spawn and the spawning season, fishermen rush to the water expecting to find the fish in the shallows, and they become puzzled when they don't find fish there. Anglers tend to forget that how far a fish migrates, and how long it stays, is dependent upon the weather and water conditions that exist at that particular time. Far too often, fishermen neglect weather and water conditions, and if the deeper parts of the structures are checked at all, it's a short check, done in a half-hearted manner. They return to the shallows with no regard to seasonal conditions because "the fish just gotta be there – it's that time of the year."

— Buck Perry