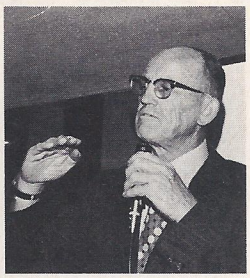
buck talks fishing



by Buck Perry, Education Editor

"Where Did The Bass Go In My Lake?"

In the past, you and I have talked quite a lot about the SEASONAL changes that occur in fishing, and how we must be able to interpret the situations throughout the whole year—if we desire to be consistently successful.

We have talked to some degree about many of the guidelines we structure fishermen and Spoonpluggers use related to the seasonal changes. But, we haven't said very much about the guidelines we apply when we run into a situation where there is a great WATER LEVEL change in the lake during the year.

A great change in water level may give an angler "fits" if he's caught unaware.

Let's talk about a situation where the water level fluctuates greatly over the season. Some fishermen may never experience such a situation, but most will, and there are some who experience it all the time. Whether we experience it or not, there are some guidelines which may be beneficial wherever we might fish. I hope we all remember why we must apply some sort of guidelines in our fishing. The purpose of which, is to show us the way to consistently catch more and bigger fish; so you and I spend our time where we have the *best* chance to catch a fish. The guidelines will help to assure that we are consistently at the right place, at the right time, fishing in the right manner; and so you and I do not get lost in our efforts in becoming better fishermen.

The fishing situation we will use for discussion is a FLATLAND type reservoir (man-made lake). We use this type because it represents the situation that creates the most problems where a big seasonal water level change occurs. Not all flatland type reservoirs have a great change in water level, but those built primarily for flood control do.

In our classification of reservoirs (man-made lakes) we put them into three classifications (as many longtime readers should know). We did this so you and I would know what to expect in the way of bottom features (structure, breaks, breaklines, deep water, etc.), in the different types.

The flatland reservoir represents a situation of a long dam (usually), and where a big flat (sloping to some degree) exists between the shoreline features (bars, etc.) and the original river channel (deepest water in area).

The LOWLAND group represents a reservoir with a shorter dam and a bottom with a minimum of flats (void of signposts to shallower water, and vice versa) and where most of the shoreline features (structure, breaks, breaklines) go or extend "all the way" to the deepest water in the area (the river channel).

The HIGHLAND group means a narrower tall dam, and the shorelines are mostly steep and deep (they increase in depth very rapidly), and where flatter shoreline features are few and far between.

Let's approach the subject (where the water level in the lake fluctuates a great deal) *as if you did not know such a situation exists.* Let's start our discussion by looking at a few figures.

Figure 1 is a side view of a section of a reservoir during a full stage, or high water mark. **Figure 2** is the same

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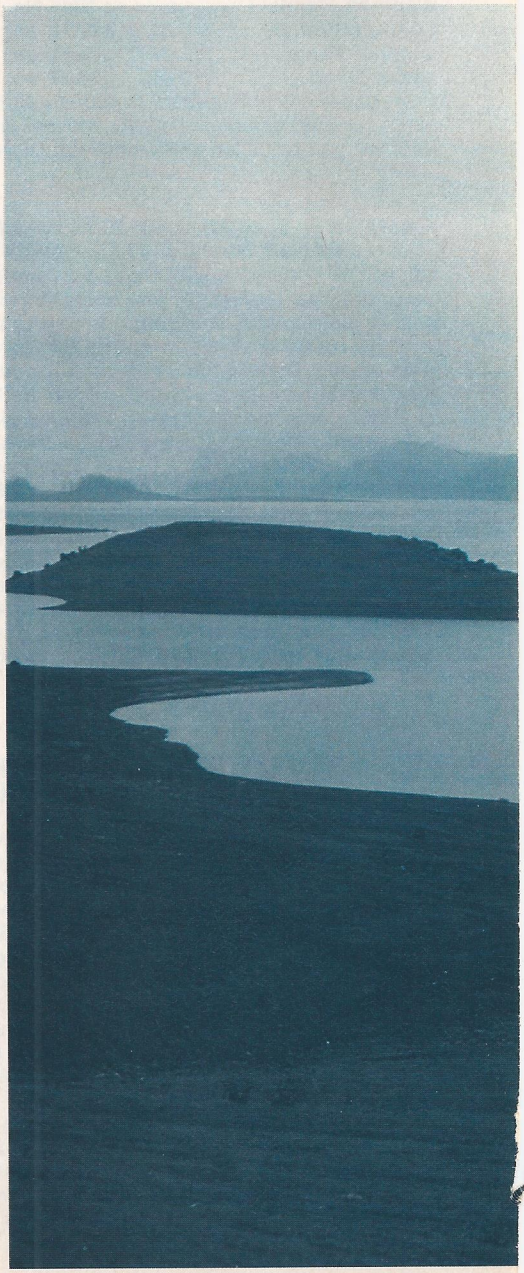

(Photo at left)—Local fishermen have placed brushy type cover near the shore and alongside the pier creating a fish magnet during "normal" (high) water conditions. But where do the fish go when the water disappears?

Man-made lakes can create problems for very many fishermen where a big seasonal water level change (drawdown) occurs. Photo below shows bottom structure revealed during low water period.

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view at a low water stage.

Figure 3 is a top view of an area in the situation. It shows the features of the bottom such as, the flats, deeper breaklines, etc., and where a feeder stream has cut a channel or "wash" through the flat.

If we looked at this lake when full, we would see a lake miles wide and many miles long. If we looked at it during a low water stage, it would appear as only a fraction of its former size. This should indicate to us the position and movement pattern of the fish would change during the season.

In some areas of the lake the distances from a high water mark to a low water mark are not so great when compared to that found in the upper portions of the reservoir. In the headwater areas furthest from the dam, the distance between a high and a low water mark can be several miles. Look at **Figure 4** to show what we mean. This top view of the reservoir shows the shapes and features of the bottom (channels, breaklines, etc.) and the high and low water pools. Position **"X"** marks the extent of the lake on the major arms during the low water stage.

The stages of water level from a seasonal standpoint are rather constant over the years. The full pool is normally in the spring. The lake may stay at this high water level throughout the spring and into summer. At some period in the summer, the "drawdown" is commenced and by late fall, the low water stage is reached. Then over the winter and into the spring, the reservoir fills again.

When the drawdown starts, and when it stops, is determined by the rains, or the demand for water downstream (below the dam). The "pull-down" isn't too rapid in most cases. How fast the "fill-up" occurs depends upon the weather, etc.

The reason the situation is of interest is because the fisherman should work the BEST area *from a seasonal point of view.*

Before the lake reaches full stage, the fish would move *toward* the shoreline with the rising water. (They spend the greater part of their time someplace in the deepest water in the area.) Which indicates, by the time the lake is full (prior to spawning), they are no longer spending their time in the deeper water of the *low water pool*, but are now spending most of it in the deeper water over the flats, or in the channels of the feeder cuts **(Figure 3)**. If the flats do not have enough depth for sanctuary (30-35 feet in most cases—if available—our guideline), we should always think any and all fish migrations start from the channels of the feeder cuts **(Figure 3)**. In the headwaters, we should figure all movements toward the shallows originate in the main channel. During spawning and good stable weather conditions we should keep this in mind and work only the shallows related to the channels.

In many lakes of this type the shallows and headwaters may be full of standing trees. But at low water stages most all the standing trees are on dry land. As the lake gets older, the amount of "timber" diminishes.

Any standing trees in the water at a low water stage are good "breaks" for the fish. This is especially true if they are located on or near a channel. The standing trees to work at a high water mark should be only those related in some manner to a channel (main river channel or feeder stream).

The start of the "drawdown" does not make the fish scoot back immediately to the deeper features in the main body of the *low pool*. For awhile, in most cases, there is still sufficient depth in the feeder cuts and channels for the fish **(Figure 3)**. However, *as the depth of the water decreases over the flats* (and in the headwaters), the movements from the deeper water of the cuts and channels become more limited (not so great) and we must do our fishing closer to the channels and feeder cuts.

By the time *the water drops off the flats* **(Figure 2)**, the mass of the fish are in, and using, the features (structure, breaks, breaklines, depths, etc.) in the low water pool, and especially those in the area where a feeder stream channel and a main channel meets **(Figure 4)**.

One year, when we get to the reservoir we find it at low pool—with the water off the flats. The next year we go back at the same period of time and the water is 10-12 feet deep over the flats, at which time we find the fish on features of the feeder channels **(Figure 3)**. A few weeks later we go back and find the water down and off the flats **(Figure 2)**. This time we find no fish in the feeder cuts **(Figure 3)**, but have a ball on the deeper bars and breaklines of the low water pool **(Figures 2 and 4)**.

It might be well to add that we should always check out the rip-rap (broken rocks & boulders) on the dam in a situation such as this. We probably will find it very productive during the low water period, but during the high water we may find most of the fish have moved away from the dam towards the shorelines. *This is especially true if part of the dam covers the flats as in* ***Figure 4****.*

In some reservoirs built primarily for flood control, there will be some parts or spots where the "flatland" features **(Figure 1)** do not exist. The shoreline and bottom features are more like a "lowland" type lake. This is caused by a "winding" main channel and a changing terrain. Sometimes a lake can be mostly "flatland" on one side, while on the other side the features are "lowland," and just a

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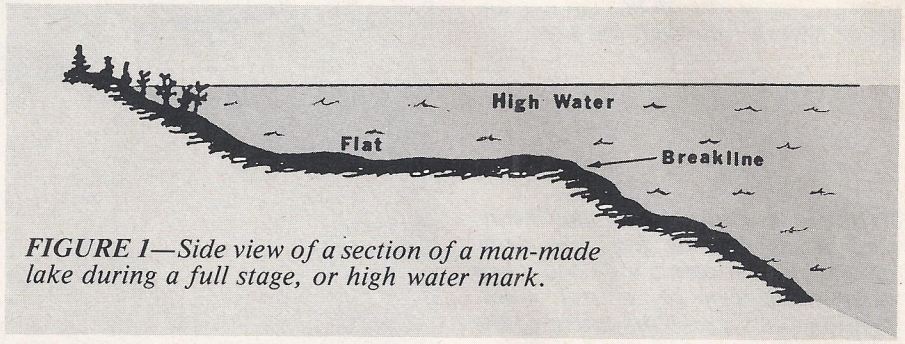

FIGURE 1—Side view of a section of a man-made lake during a full stage, or high water mark.

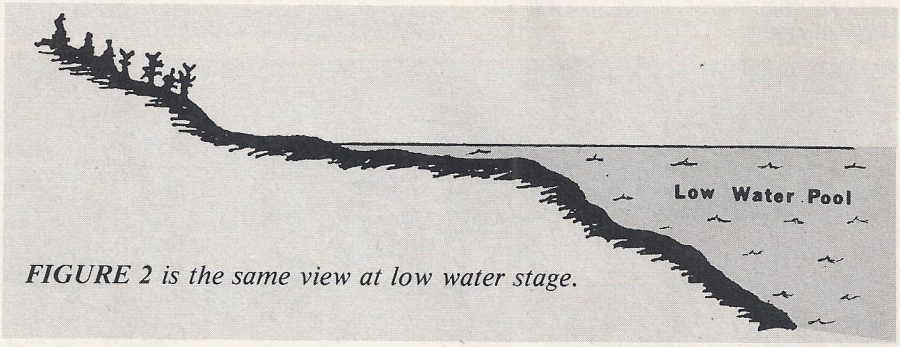

FIGURE 2 is the same view at low water stage.

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short drop in water level will show the clean sand or clay shorelines. They stand out like a sore thumb for miles away. **Figure 4** (top view of reservoir) is one where one side has more "flatland" features while the other side is more "lowland."

The fisherman can use maps, terrain observations, depth sounders, and experience on the lake to find out where the different type bottom features exist.

Figure 5 is a side view of an area where the features of an area are like the "lowland."

Figure 6 is a top view of an area where the features are "lowland" rather than "flatland." Note there are no large flats between the high water mark and the low water mark. The figure shows a "cove" (bay—feeder stream) and some contour lines and features that exist during a low water stage.

For many of us and for most of the season (high water), it would probably be better to do our fishing in the sections that have the "lowland" features. At high water the parts with the "flatland" features would present greater areas to be checked, more difficult interpretations and lure presentation. On the "lowland" side (or where it exists) the fish and their movements would not be so affected by the great change in water level. And the structure, breaks and breaklines are cleaner, much more pronounced, and easy to find. Of course, we would fish the "flatland" areas *if we know the lake and the productive areas fed by the feeder cuts*. Overall, when the water is high, the section with the "lowland" features would be our best bet.

At a low water period **(Figure 2)**, we wouldn't pass up the "lowland" features (especially in the late fall), but we would spend a great deal of time

FIGURE 3 (at right)—Shows the features of the bottom such as the "flats," deeper breaklines, etc., and where a feeder stream has cut a channel or "wash" through the flat.

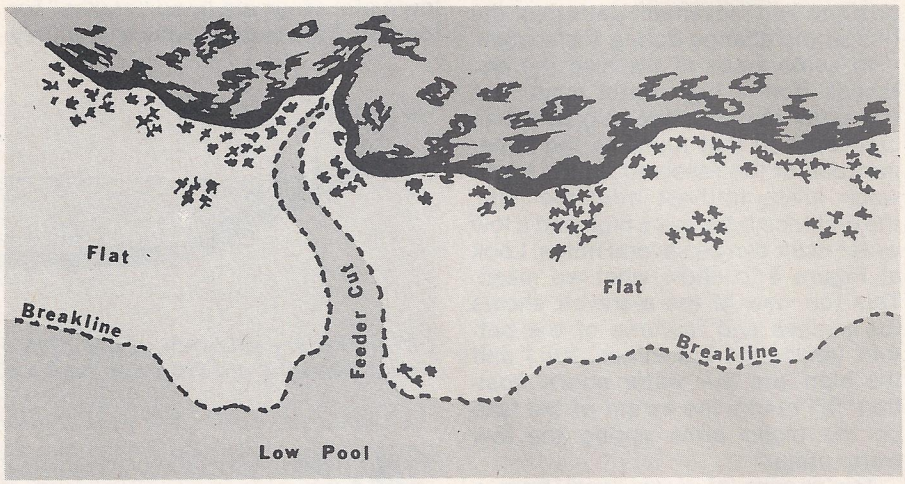
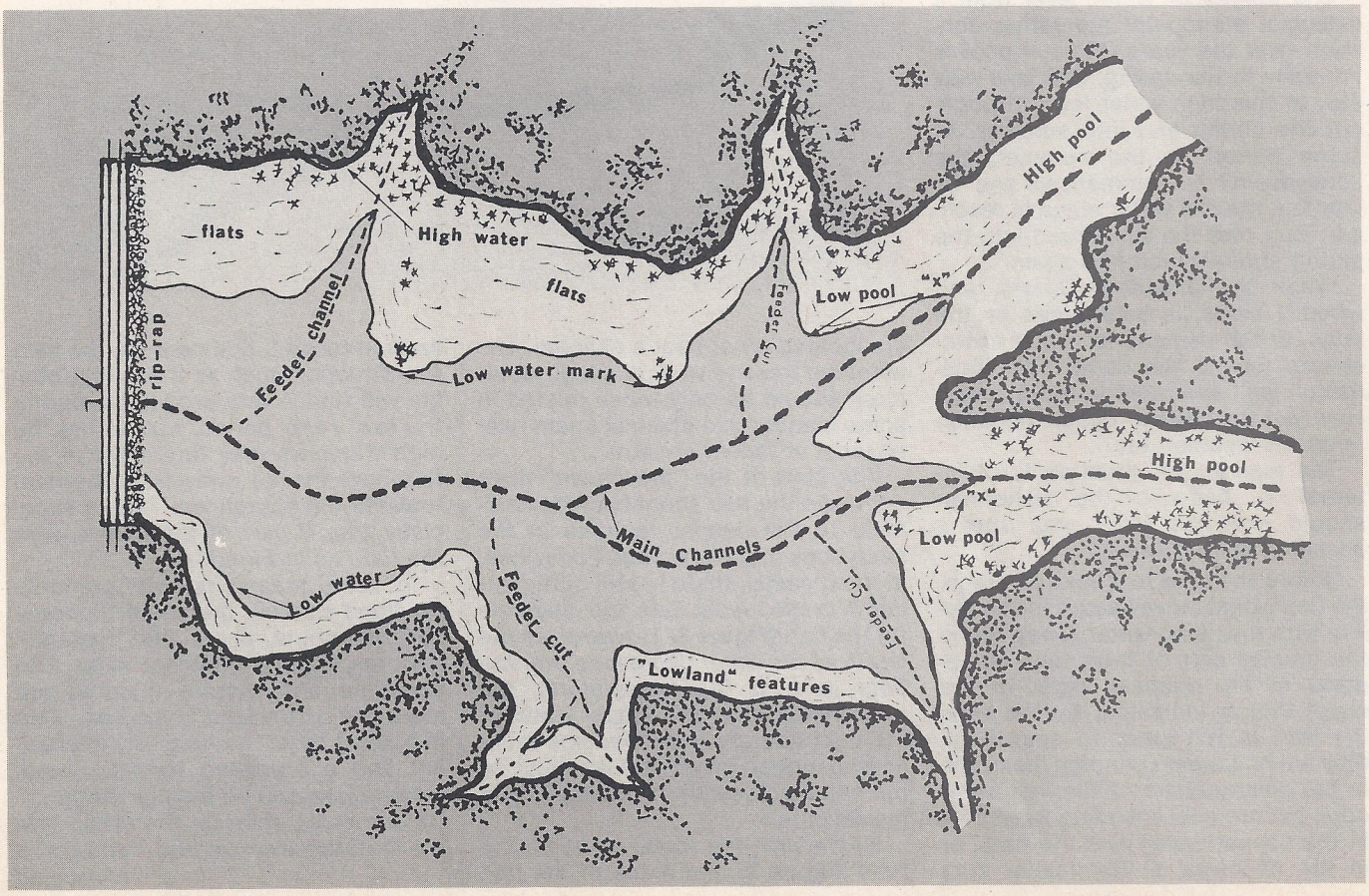


FIGURE 4 (below)—In the headwater areas furthest from the dam, the distance between a high and a low water mark can be several miles. Position "X" marks the extent of the lake on the major arms during low water stage.



on the structure and breaklines of the "flatland" side. In this area a great many fish have been "pushed" here from long distances and from a tremendous amount of water. At this time, we would work very thoroughly the rip-rap on the dam.

We can establish a pretty good guideline on how to fish this type reservoir from a seasonal point of view by saying: "Next year, during high water, I'll spend most of my time at the shorelines, or sections that have the steeper 'lowland' features. Any shallow or deep areas checked on the 'flatland' side would be those where a feeder stream channel cuts through the flat. However, I will not *concentrate* my efforts on the 'flatland' side until most of the water has dropped off the flats."

The question arises: *"What sort of guideline do I follow from a seasonal point of view in regard to the main channel? In other words, how far toward the headwaters should I go in fishing a lake like this with the heavy pull-down?*

At the *low water pool* most structure fishermen (Spoonpluggers) would place no limit as to how far up the lake he goes. His observations of weather, water and depths would determine it. His first stop in his fishing toward the headwaters (for observation) would be when he has only 30-35 foot depth in the channel. If water color is good (dark side), and the weather condition's stable and good, he could continue his fishing until he had only 8-10 feet at the "drop-off" (disregarding any depth in the channel). He would not go much beyond this point unless a current is present in the river channel.

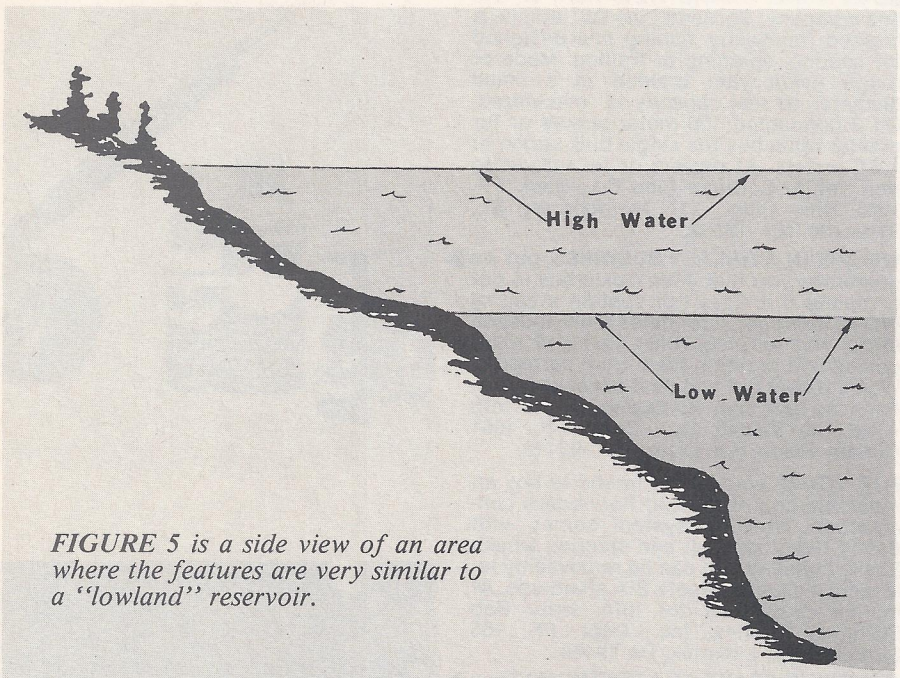


FIGURE 5 is a side view of an area where the features are very similar to a "lowland" reservoir.

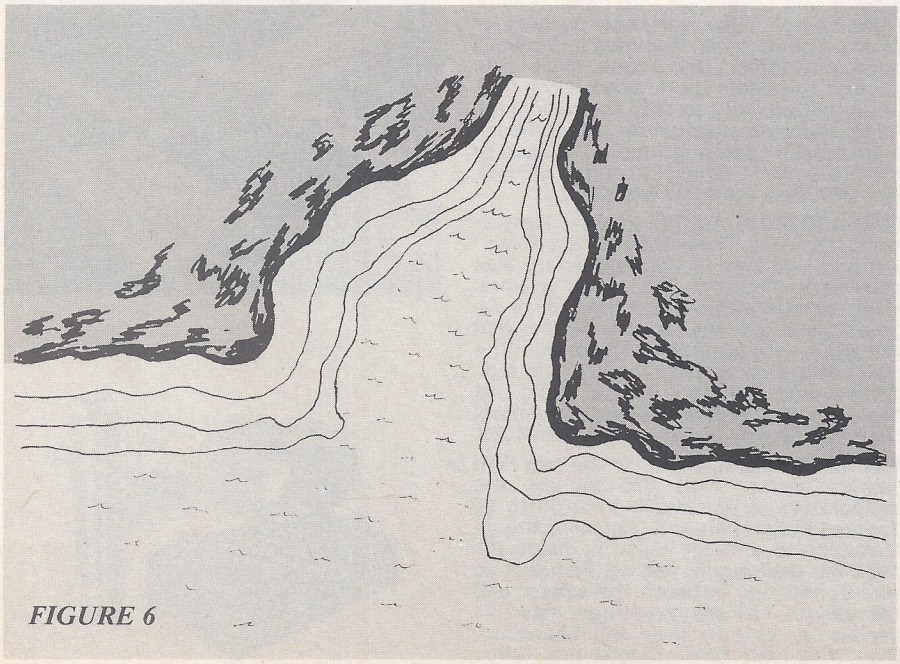


FIGURE 6

At a *high water pool*, a good "rule of thumb" (guideline) practiced by most Spoonpluggers, when fishing for bass, is to limit his travels (and fishing) toward the headwaters to where the lake stops at the low water pool **("X" on Figure 4)**. If the lake contains migratory fish like the white bass, stripers, walleye, sauger, etc., then you should check the water above the low water pool during the "run." Not going beyond the low water pool for bass does not say there are no bass moving with the water as it backs up. It means we must spend out time where we have the best chance to catch a fish. And this calls for the features related to the low water pool.

The way a knowledgeable fisherman works a reservoir of this type, with its big change in water levels, does not rule out the fact that other areas, structure, breaks, breaklines, etc., will not produce fish. He is very much aware of the fact, at some time or other, a fish can be caught most any place, by most anyone, on most anything, and by most any method. However, that's just not the way he wants to play it! For he knows, if he is to become a better fisherman, and consistently put more and bigger fish on the stringer, he must spend his time where he has the best chance to catch a fish. His guidelines will do just that.

Those fishermen who experience situations where the water level fluctuates over ANY period of time, have a chance to do their best mapping and interpretation of the available structure, breaks, and breaklines. At low water periods they should look over the exposed features and how these features are related to deep water. They should get shoreline sightings, figure approximate depths and distances, and draw detailed maps of each good area. AND, this is one instance where the camera becomes one of their better "tools."

This is an example of a fishing situation where you and I must have some sort of guidelines for successful fishing. We just can't go out there, look over that big expanse of water, and not know what to do. Not only do we have to have guidelines for different type bodies of water, but we have to have them for ANY type situation we might face. This is the reason a lot of effort went into our new Home Study Series (available soon), to be sure we didn't skip over any that might be the key to YOUR fishing success.