

# When Fishing's Tough, You Can Still Save The Day!

by Buck Perry, Education Editor

Part One of Two

**F**or this and next month's fishing "talks" let's assume that you and I are going to fish four bodies of water. We will fish two natural lakes and two man-made lakes (reservoirs). These lakes are widely scattered in four different states. We have never fished them before. In each case, as our luck would have it, we get there shortly after a bad cold front, and the movements and migrations of the fish are practically zero. We find that, in order to make a catch, we have to go "straggler" fishing (catching scattered fish here and there).

When we started out on this trip we both had a depth sounder. While loading

the boat the first day I slipped on a wet plank, and my depth meter wound up in the bottom of the lake. Ten minutes after we get on the lake yours goes on the blink.

First we will fish a big, shallow, "saucer"-type natural lake. The water near shore is covered solid with weeds, grass and pads. This condition extends to 3-4 feet in depth. Farther out to about 6-7 feet in depth are scattered patches of grass, weeds and pads — all exposed. The balance of the lake has a gentle-sloping bottom, free of weeds and pads, but is covered with a layer of muck. As far as we know there are no deep holes, slots or channels. And there exists no bottom

structure of bars, humps, breaks or breaklines (such as a drop-off). The deepest water is around 20 feet out in the middle. As the weeds suggest, the water color is a darker yellow-green.

The second natural lake we are going to fish is a great big, deep, clear rascal. Tall weeds extend down to a depth of 17 feet with most of the outer weeds coming almost to the top of the water. We cannot find a contour map of the lake, and our efforts to find out something about the lake from the local people don't pay off. To cap it all, we find we are not allowed to troll with a motor in this lake.

The first man-made lake we are going



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like. They are straggler fishing blindly. Few realize that most of the time most of these features will never hold a fish, even under the best weather and water conditions." — Buck Perry



to fish is an old "lowland"-type reservoir. It has been built so long ago there is not a trace of a bush, stump or root. The bottoms are completely clean, mostly hard clay, sand or rocks. The structure types are rather constant all over the reservoir, the only great difference being depth. In this case, structure is primarily in the form of "bars" that run out from the shoreline. Most all "points" have underwater bars. At the entrance to all coves, structure exists to some degree. There is a minimum of "flats," and most all structure extends to deep water. The water color is a white-sandy color.

The second reservoir we will fish is a large "flatland" reservoir. The only appreciable deep water is in the old river channel. In our case the deep water runs rather close to one side of the reservoir. This side, and especially in the lower sections, has fairly good structure in the form of bars, humps, breaklines, etc. But the other side of the lake consists of miles of flats and shallow water. In certain areas on this shallow side there are coves and sloughs, some of which could be termed as swampy. Most of these "back areas" have weeds of some description, and all of

them are long distances from any deep water. We launch our boat on the deeper side. The water color is red-muddy.

**QUESTION: How would we "straggler" fish these four bodies of water?**

Before we get to the actual fishing in these lakes, let me pause and make some "for what-it's-worth" comments.

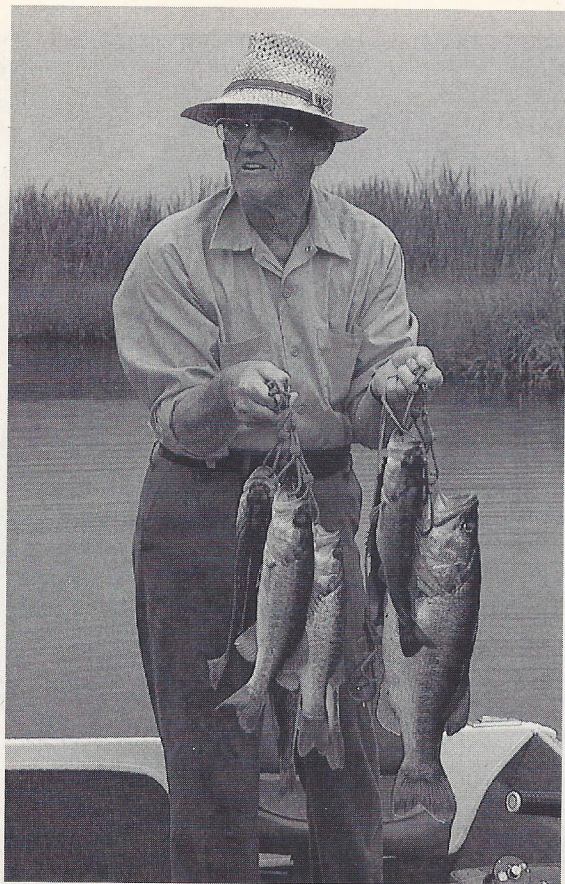
My observations over the years have shown me that most fishermen are ALWAYS straggler fishing. They are always fishing in a hit-or-miss fashion. They are always fishing BLIND and just hoping they will catch a fish. I would further state that most fishermen are fishing the shallows, casting to visible objects such as weeds, bushes, rocks, stumps, logs, etc. and switching lure sizes, colors and actions — hoping to present something the fish might like. They are straggler fishing blindly. Few realize — most of the time most of these features will never hold a fish, even under the best weather and water conditions! As far as changing lures — these fishermen are putting their faith in fishing AIDS. Serve up a bad weather condition and their goose is cooked in most instances.

I am not saying that blind straggler fish-

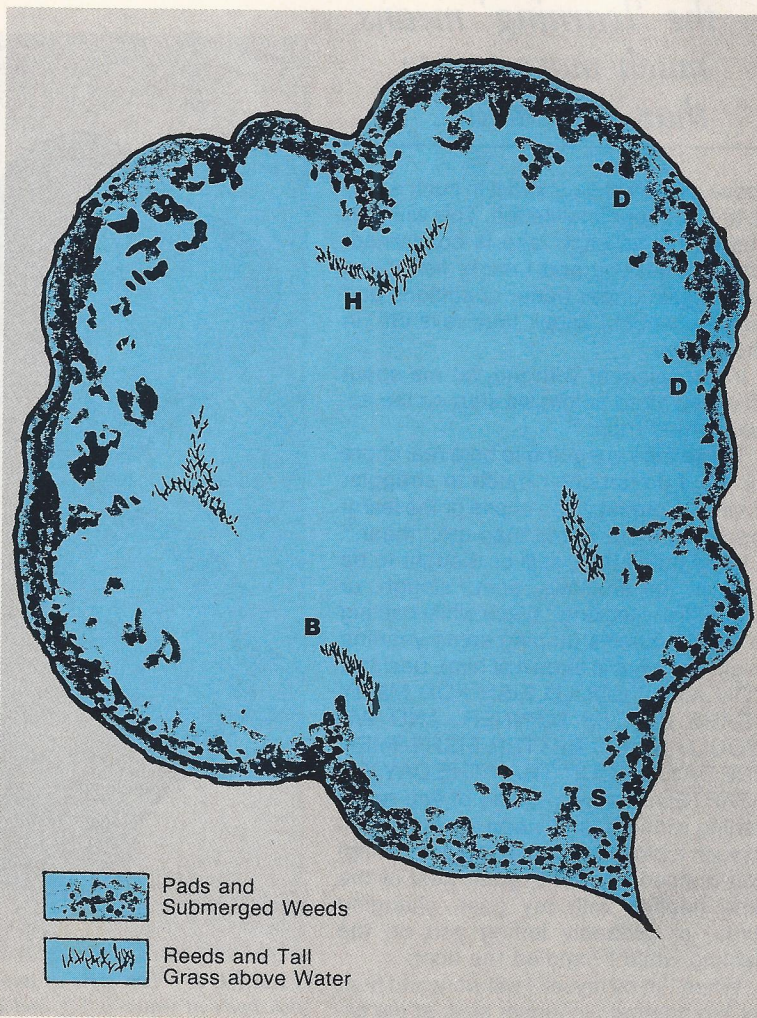
ing will not catch fish. (If it didn't, most fishermen would never catch one.) Even a blind hog will come upon an acorn occasionally. What I am saying is, the blind straggler fisherman will seldom make a great catch and will seldom have many big fish. Most fishermen will wind up with yearling fish because they are fishing for yearlings and not for lunker fish. Take a gander at your past fishing successes. Just how often did you make a limit catch and ALL of them were lunker size? How many good catches did you make and ALL of them were yearlings? How many times did you go and not catch ANY? Can you explain "why" in each case?

I am also not necessarily saying that blind straggler fishing is completely out of order. What I am saying is: Why fish for stragglers *blindly* all the time? There exists certain weather and water conditions where the movements of the fish are so bad that we must "straggler" fish — if we want some fish for the dinner table or have to catch a fish.

The greatest difference between a good fisherman's "straggler" fishing and most "straggler" fishermen is: one is *continued*



Although fishing conditions were poor this day, Education Editor Buck Perry (above) and a fishing companion still were able to make a decent catch by planning their approach to "straggler fishing" (catching a fish here and another there). In this article Buck explains how this can best be accomplished.



**FIGURE 1** – Top view of a large, shallow, "saucer"-type natural lake.



# When Fishing's Tough

**planned** and the other is not. Prevailing weather and water conditions plus the presentation of lures and baits will spell the difference whether the planner makes a great catch, a fair catch or a scrawny catch. The nonplanner MAY make a little catch, but more likely no catch at all. When conditions are unfavorable and I have to make a "straggler" catch, I feel just as satisfied with a scrawny catch as I would with a great catch under better conditions.

The greatest and most important difference between the "planner" and the "nonplanner" is the planner will learn something during the trip, whereas the nonplanner will not. If you and I come off a lake after fishing and we do not know more than when we started, the trip was largely wasted effort in my book.

On these trips, you and I are going to do a lot of "straggler" fishing, but we are going to do it in such a way to have the best chance to make a good catch, and

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*"I don't cater much to straggler fishing – the 'learning' means much more to me than the 'meat'."*

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above all we will go about it in such a way as to add to our knowledge. This will hold true as far as each lake is concerned. Who knows, you and I might fish these lakes again under better conditions and then we would "knock their tails off" in short order.

If you will bear with me, let me spout off a little more before we start on the actual fishing trips.

These trips are going to be a real chore for me. I do not cater much to straggler fishing — probably the chase or the learning mean more to me than the "meat." It takes little effort, skill or thought to be back in the shallows, some slough, or some "fishy-looking" place while casting to visible objects (hoping some yearling might like what is thrown at him). Besides, YOU AND I COULD FISH FOR MANY YEARS IN THIS MANNER, AND WE WOULD BE NO BETTER FISHERMEN THE DAY WE QUIT THAN THE DAY WE STARTED. Probably some of you recall fishing with me, and when we moved into such a place casting (straggler fishing) you noticed I spent a great deal of the time fiddling with my gear, changing lures, or probably letting you do the casting while I handled the boat.

When I'm by myself I will work and hunt for big numbers in lunker size, at the expense of no catch at all. I will often be do-

ing some "straggler" fishing during this process, as this will give me some "keys." When allowed, I will do it trolling rather than casting. In most cases I can learn very little by casting, but I am learning all the time when trolling. The trolling will also tell me when and where to cast. This gives me a chance to be at the right place at the right time, and presenting my lures in a correct manner.

My reluctance to be off in some shallow area casting for "stragglers" may in some way explain why in the past I "shook up" a lot of people on "their" lake. In stating the above, do not think I never cast the shallows. I do, but only when I am **sure** the area contains a lot of fish worthy of pursuit. Many times during a spawning season or when I find a good movement of fish toward the shallows, I will work the shallow water by casting, but the fish have to be there before I will do it.

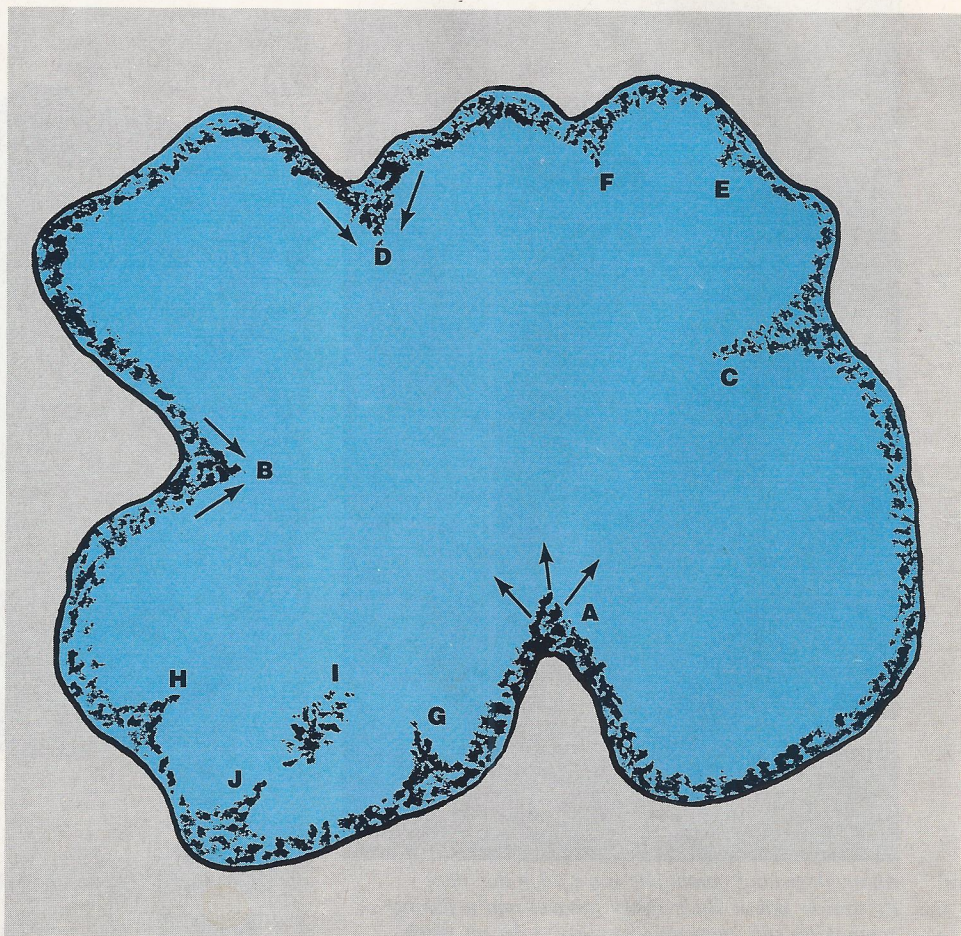
Now I think it is about time to get back to the question at hand. Let us recall the fishing trips just as they happened.

When we fish a lake in a particular manner, there are three reasons for doing it. (1) To get you a few fish for the dinner table; (2) it gives us a chance to make a lunker catch regardless of the weather and water conditions; and (3) to learn all we can about the lake.

Since we are making these four fishing trips over an extended period, and since the lakes are widely scattered (they may be in the North or South), we had better consider our straggler fishing for a cold-water condition (pre-spawn and spawn) and for a warm-water period (post-spawn).

**Figure 1** shows a top view of the first natural lake we are going to fish. As stated previously, it is a big, shallow, "saucer"-type lake. The water near the shoreline is covered solid with weeds, grass and pads. This extends out to a depth of 3-4 feet. Farther out to about 6-7 feet in depth are scattered patches of weeds, pads, grass or reeds. The balance of the lake has a gentle sloping bottom free of weeds, pads, etc., but is covered with a thick layer of muck. As far as we know, there are no deep holes, slots or channels. And there exists no pronounced structure such as bars, humps, breaks or breaklines. The deepest water in the lake is around 20 feet, supposed to exist someplace near the center of the lake. As the weeds suggest, the water color is a darker yellow-green.

First let us approach our straggler fishing as if it were a cold-water condition. Since it is cold, our speed control (lure speed) will be slow. We know the weather is bad for fishing, and that most of the fish



**FIGURE 2** – Top view of another natural lake, but unlike the lake shown in **Figure 1**, this body of water is big and deep, containing crystal-clear water and tall weeds that extend down to a depth of 17 to 18 feet.



should be in or near the 20-foot depth. But since we have no forms of structure to guide us, and since the fish are in their "sanctuary" depths and in a nonchasing mood, we really have our work cut out for us trying to catch a fish in this deep water.

Since I am running the boat and calling the shots, we will do both casting and trolling — as called for. Our purpose is to get you some "meat," and for me to find out what makes this lake tick.

We will start out by trolling. We will use lure sizes with running depths that will allow us to get right back to the solid weedline. We will troll these small, shallow-running lures just as close to the weeds, pads, grass, etc. as possible. We will run our boat into every little slot between the weed patches. If an opening is large enough to run the boat through — in we go. We will be raising and lowering our rod tips constantly to maneuver the lures through and around the weeds.

We'll continue to do this until we "get the lay of the land." We will find out if any fish are around the weeds and grass, and we will keep our eyes peeled for the most potential spots. It is possible we may do our trolling completely around the lake.

After we have made our trolling passes with shallow-running lures next to the weeds, we will then move toward the

deeper water. I do not intend to spend a great deal of time working the deeper water (open water away from weeds), for I know the conditions with which we are faced. But we have to check the major portion of this section for two reasons: (1) Who knows, we might just "stumble" upon the fish; and (2) we have to get a picture of conditions present; we have to know the type of bottom, depths, locations, etc.

It is very important, when trolling this open water, that we keep our lures in proper position. The correct position is when the lures are barely "tipping" the high spots in the muck. We must pay very close attention to lure sizes, running depths, and line length to maintain lure position. The line length would be constantly changing in order to maintain the correct depth as we worked progressively deeper. A lot of rod action may be necessary to keep lures clean.

We would not strike out directly toward the center of the lake, but would make our trolling runs rather parallel to the shoreline, or we would crisscross or troll in several directions, progressively moving deeper. At this time I would not be too concerned with covering every little section and I would probably do a sloppy job of depth control. But I would cover

enough area and control my depth well enough to show me if any fish movement was occurring, and to show me just what, where and how to fish this deep section.

The way to go straggler fishing during this colder season (pre-spawn) would be to work the shallows, both casting and trolling. I would probably put emphasis on casting. In casting I would concentrate my efforts in four particular areas (shown to me by my trolling runs). (1) Any indicated slough such as area "S" (Figure 1). (2) All areas that indicate a cleaner bottom such as area "H". This is indicated by standing grass and reeds, rather than submerged weeds and pads. (3) All long extrusions or "fingers" in the weeds such as "B". This would indicate some sort of "bar" or some change in the bottom. (4) Any particular area along the shoreline where the weeds, grass, pads, etc. do not extend very far into the lake such as area "D". This should indicate deeper water close to the shoreline.

In each area chosen for casting we will work from the outer weeds all the way back to the extreme shallows. We'll use

*"When straggler fishing during the colder pre-spawn season, work the shallows, both casting and trolling."*

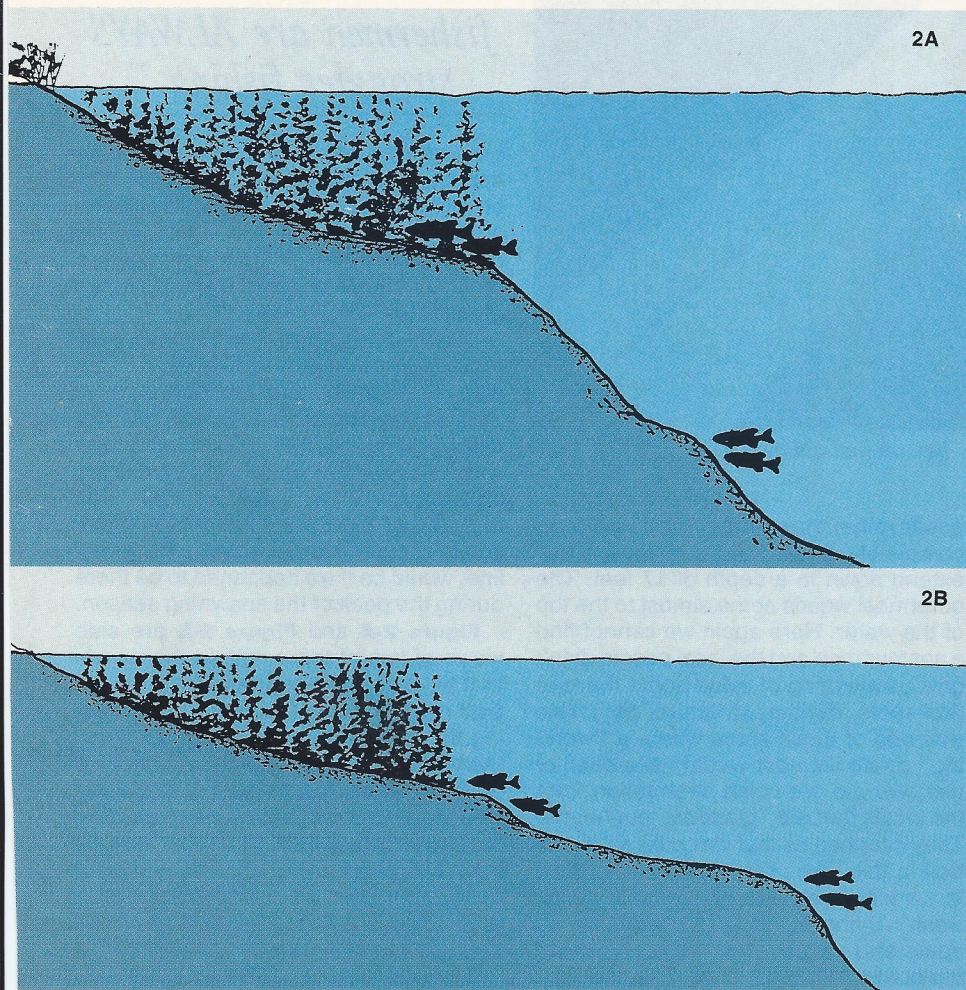
weedless lures with a slow retrieve — primarily letting the lure slither slowly through the weeds. We'd let it sink into any "pothole" that might exist. Of course, we would be checking lure speed, and at times having the lures crawling or skittering across the top of the weeds and grass. But in the overall picture during this colder period, and the bad weather conditions, our retrieve would be slow, and we would work our lures as deep as possible.

If we found ourselves in this lake during a warmer water period (post-spawn), then I would spend little time casting. Any casting that I would do would be limited to the edges of the outer weeds, but only if we have picked up a couple of fish in a particular area on the troll.

In order to straggler fish in this lake successfully under warmer water conditions and bad weather — trolling is the way to go. Here again, I would spend more time in the deeper water than I did under the colder conditions, but due to the conditions (no structure, mucky, bad weather for fish activity), I'd spend most all my time trolling as close to the weeds as possible. I could and would cover a lot of water for I would be "balling the jack" (trolling fast) due to the warmer water.

Now, after seeing how I would straggler fish this particular lake, under both cold

*continued*



FIGURES 2A and 2B — Side view of two weedy points (as described in article).



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and warm conditions, you might come back at me and say: "Why did you fish the lake in this manner?"

I have already stated the reason several times — to get you some meat, and for me to learn something about the lake. If I didn't learn something about the lake as I went along, probably I would be unable to get you your meat. In fact, the important thing for me to do was to learn where and how I would get you some fish. So this was the route I took.

You come back at me again with: "But WHY did you fish this lake in this manner to get me some fish and for you to

much time doing this (unless contact was made with a fair number of good-sized fish). I would move to the deeper water and spend most all my time trolling with my lures skipping the muck. I'd find the deepest water and I would concentrate my efforts in this area. I would be looking for a clean spot. It could be sand or shell, soft or hard.

After we had strung our fish, I'd get good shoreline sightings for future outings — at which time I would spend most of my time here, hot or cold, good weather or bad.

**Figure 2** is a top view of the second natural lake we are going to fish. It is a great big, deep, clear rascal (probably considered better for drinking water pur-

fishing with the motor running. At least we could have used the boat to ward off some of them from running directly over our lures.

Here again, I must get you some fish under a weather condition that does not promise any degree of fish movements, and I must find out something about the lake (structure, bottom conditions, depths, migration routes, etc.).

About the only clue or key to be had are the extrusions ("fingers") in the weedline. It is at these areas we will do our straggler fishing, mapping, interpretations, etc. These projections indicate some change has occurred in the bottom. Normally they show a slight bar, ridge or hump. They should also give the best access to deep water. I have marked the areas in **Figure 2 (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J)**.

We will position our boat at the end of these weed projections, then "fancast" the whole area such as shown at position "A". We will use sinking lures, and on each cast we will count the time for the lures to reach the bottom (line goes slack when the lure reaches bottom). In this

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*"My observations over the years have shown me that most fishermen are ALWAYS straggler fishing."*

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way we can get a complete picture — depths, degree of slope, ridge or bar, breaklines, breaks, type of bottom (clean or dirty, soft or hard), etc. While we are doing this, we are fishing to see if any fish are using the area, and if a straggler has moved up.

Due to the depths under the boat, it will require good control to keep a walking type lure on the bottom. Probably our best bet is to stick mostly to a "jump type" lure such as a jig, spinner, spoon, etc. If the water was cold we would work slow. If the water was warm we would work our lures fast. About the ONLY time I would ask you to cast behind me, toward the shoreline, would be if we happened to be there during the peak of the spawning season.

**Figure 2-A** and **Figure 2-B** are side views of two of the points in the weeds that we have mapped with our lures. In both cases we will assume the fish are using the area for migration. In **Figure 2-A** the bottom drops off rapidly. A breakline (sudden drop) occurs just outside the weedline. Four fish have moved up. Two have remained at a slight break, approximately 30 feet down. Two have moved up to the weedline but not at the tip of the projection. They have moved up on the side of the weed finger.

In **Figure 2-B** the bottom does not drop off very fast. There is a slight break just



Education Editor Buck Perry releases a trophy bass in the shallows.

learn something?" Now I gotcha. It was simple. I just took the basic fishing facts (truths), expanded them slightly and tied them together to fit the conditions that we faced. I didn't invent this procedure, the circumstances told me what to do. Review what we did, and I believe you will see this to be true.

Since you asked this question, let me expand this thought by saying we will fish this same lake again in a warm period under a GOOD weather condition. Now I do not plan nor will I do much "straggler" fishing. My plan now is to let you make those lunker catches just as fast as you can wind them in.

Under such good conditions I would start by trolling fast around the outer edges of the weeds. I would not spend too

poses rather than fishing). Tall weeds go completely around the shoreline. They extend down to a depth of 17 feet. The outermost weeds come almost to the top of the water. Here again we cannot find a contour map and the local people didn't give us anything of value about the lake (hot-spots, depths, structure, etc.) This was one of those times where a "working" depth sounder would have been of use. We did get some information from the locals that did "gladden" our hearts. They informed us that we could not motor troll in this lake. This presented quite a few added problems, the least of which wasn't trying to keep the large speed boats and water skiers from swamping our boat. At least we could have dodged some of them if we could have done our



out from the weedline. But mostly the bottom has a gentle slope toward deeper water until it reaches the "drop-off," a good distance out from the weedline.

Here again, four fish have moved toward the area. Two have remained at the drop-off, but two have moved up to the area at the tip of the weedline. One is at a small break and the other at the base of the weedline.

Now refer back to **Figure 2** (the top view) and carefully note the casting patterns shown on finger projections "B" and finger "D". In the light of conditions present, shown in **Figure 2-A** and **2-B**, you should readily see that in order to fully test each weedline projection we must maneuver the boat in different positions.

If we find a structure with a gentle slope as found in **Figure 2-B**, we will have to move the boat position out from the weedline toward deeper water and "fancast" the area. We could find we have to move the boat toward deeper water several times before we can reach the drop-off or the deepest water in the area. I hope it is thoroughly understood we would fish the bottom, not just open water.

These long, sloping structures (bars, ridges, etc.) are ideal areas to check our slowest speeds with live or cut bait. We can cast or drift it. If you wanted to use the oars you could troll us across the area.

About the only change that I would make in the presentation of lures, good weather or bad, would be to use more free-swimming lures during the warmer (good) weather conditions. I'd be sure to run them at all depths, jammed up against the tall weedline from all boat positions. And I'd not fool around with slow reel or rod action. I'd really wind the lure speeds up. When working the bottoms in the area, I'd use large and heavier lures so I could increase my speed as much as possible but maintain my depth control.

When studying **Figure 2** you probably noticed I had a weed patch out from the shoreline and I labeled it "I". You probably wondered why I did not call attention to it during the discussions on the other areas. This was left out on purpose at that time because a condition such as this is not likely to occur in a lake of this nature. Further, I wanted to call special attention to such a condition if it did exist.

A weed patch such as this would indicate a structure in the form of a hump or underwater island. These can be of major importance in a lake of this nature, and you should always be looking for one. In most cases structure like this will produce fish.


In fishing this type spot, I would go completely around it, fancasting to establish shape, depths, breaks, breaklines, and the "contact point." I would pay very

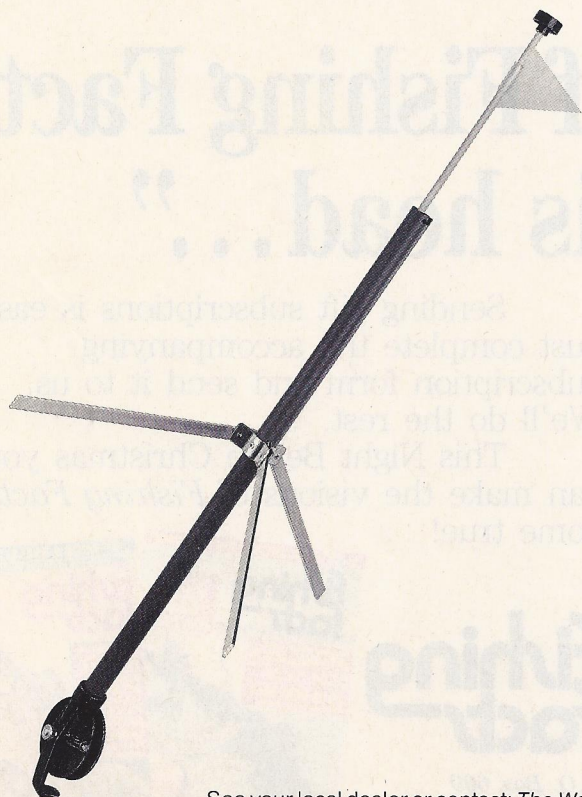
close attention to see if the weed patch connects in some manner to the shoreline. In **Figure 2** it would appear that it connects to the projection "J", most likely in the form of a ridge, or "saddle." If this is so, then the likelihood of this being a major migration route for fish is increased greatly.

After my casts have definitely established the "contact point" (where fish first make contact with the structure), then I would concentrate my fishing in this area.

I am not going to wait until you ask me a "why." I am going to ask you to answer the "why" in the light of our having "straggler" fished these two lakes. It's the same old question we have considered for quite some time now. That is, how a stranger can come to "your" lake and make a good catch while you are drawing a blank at the same time. The question is — why?

I hope before we are through with our study, you'll be telling fishing buddies: "Regardless of how many fish I catch on any given day, if I do not know more at the end of the day than I did when I started, I consider the day almost wasted."

All you have to do is remember to ask yourself the "why" at all times during your fishing and, while you are at it, remember that in next month's *Fishing Facts* we will go back and discuss those two reservoirs we plan to fish. 



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