

Buzz Bait Bass

by Steve Quinn



Over the past 20 years, I've had some incredible bites on buzzbaits, fishing them over weedy or brush-covered flats, or zipping them through emergent vegetation or stick-ups. And in those muggy, overcast afternoons of late summer, a noisy buzzbait can be the top choice for outsize largemouths. But what about right now? During fall?

"Buzzbaits can work just fine from the Postspawn Period through summer," In-Fisherman TV Director Jim Lindner offers, "but conditions have to be just right to make a buzzer the best option. It's a bait I always have tied on but often don't use for days at a time. When bass hold on deep structure or at the base of weedlines, worms, jigs, or crankbaits reach them more effectively to draw strikes. And when they're deep beneath docks or buried in timber, a buzzer usually won't lure them out. And during summer cold fronts, forget them."

"In fall, though, changing patterns of weedgrowth combined with changing position of the bass help make buzzbaits a top lure choices any day that's not too windy. During summer, large flats in lakes and reservoirs may develop a thick canopy of weedgrowth. Some bass remain in this dense growth, but few anglers target them. The only way to tempt a bite is to drop a jig or worm in every pocket, a tedious proposition and usually a low-percentage presentation.

“But cooling water in fall thins the plants. Several species of weeds virtually disappear, leaving clumps of plants like coontail, cabbage, and milfoil that are tolerant of cold water.

“Bass that had been living on the flats are more exposed; they can get a better look at a bait moving overhead. Also, some bass move from shallow shoreline cover onto the flats where feeding opportunities become easier as weedgrowth declines. Some fish also move onto the flats from deep weedlines, as the bite along deep weedlines often declines during this period. The flats become the focus for bass activity, making spinnerbaits, buzzbaits, and rattling baits excellent choices.”

This seasonal shift typically occurs as waters cool from the low 60°F range into the low 50s. We consider 50°F about the bottom end of the buzzbait window. But that gradual decrease in water temperature may occur over a month in most areas, opening a window of opportunity for the best buzzbait bite of the season.



Buzzbait Evolution

The Harkin's Lunker Lure ignited the buzzbait craze on a national level in 1976 and remains a favorite bait and top producer. Basic lure design hasn't changed much since then, though the Terminator Titanium Buzzbait has several new design features noted by the keen eye and ear of the buzzbait enthusiast.

The Lunker Lure sports the original aluminum delta blade with ears tuned for clockwise rotation. The Terminator borrowed features from at least five of the most highly acclaimed buzzbaits, including a serrated blade rarely seen on present-day buzzbaits, but noteworthy for producing an exaggerated bubble trail. The wire is made of nitrol, a titanium-nickel alloy that offers countless fishing applications, and the blade also has a different metal formulation. The Terminator's frame and waterski-shape head make a compact package, something lure designer Rob Kilby advocates in heavily fished bass waters. (Lunker Lure, 618/985-4214; Outdoor Innovations [Terminator], 800/944-4766.)

Buzzbait Basics

The buzzbait design dates to the 1960s, though the first lure didn't hit the national market until 1976. That bait was Harkins Lunker Lure, originally crafted by Hack Wilson of Marion, Illinois, and still made by Lunker Lure Products of Carterville, Illinois. According to Bob Mason, bass fishing pioneer and founder of the Bass Casters Association, Wilson made buzzbaits in his garage for 15 years before selling his patent to Jim Aron who with Bill Harkins began marketing the Lunker Lure.

It was an immediate hit with bass anglers fishing tournaments around Illinois, and with local anglers who scored big on Rend Lake. Then, according to Bob Mason, “It went

south.” Its fame spread fast on the tournament-happy reservoirs of the central and southeastern states.

The “new lure” syndrome surely accounted for some successes. Bass had never experienced these miniature egg beaters pulsing through their domain. But the lure also struck a chord in the bass’s brain that had never been tweaked before. Pro anglers and novices made killer catches with buzzbaits.

Various imitations and innovations appeared. Many of the first-generation buzzbaits sported delta blades stamped with the patent number 3093923 of the original Lunker Lure, a configuration that turns in a clockwise direction (when observed from the rear). Others adopted a delta blade that rotates in the opposite direction (patent number 4201008). The direction in which the “ears” of the lure are bent determines its rotation and also the direction it tends to pull. A buzzer can be tuned, however, by bending the shaft to the right or left to balance the pull of the blade. But baits that run right or left are valuable tools, for they can be steered to bump into docks, stumps, lily pads, or other cover.

Many of the most recent buzzbait models use these same delta blades or slight modifications, since this action has been proven in every major North American bass fishery. “I’d say the original Lunker Lure is the best buzzbait I’ve ever used,” says In-Fisherman TV star and co-founder Al Lindner, “though admittedly, I haven’t sampled some of the newer styles.”

Rick Clunn brought early fame to the buzzing technique when he used it to gain victories in the 1976 and 1977 BASSMASTERS Classics, held on Lake Guntersville in Alabama and on Lake Tohopekaliga, Florida. At Guntersville, Clunn used a spinnerbait but added large blades and burned it just under the surface, similar to a buzzbait’s action. Since that time, Rick Clunn, heralded as the crankbait king, has used buzzbaits as a secret weapon in spring, summer, and fall.



Harkin

s Lunker Lure, with its long, straight shaft and slightly upturned hook remained the standard, though many deviations in blade shape and material, body shape, and wire configuration appeared in the ensuing 22 years. Other additions have included clackers that swing on the vertical portion of the buzzbait's arm and contact the blade on every revolution, or positioning the blade to contact the head at every turn for extra sound. Alterations to the blade, such as perforating it and serrating its edges to produce a greater bubble trail, sometimes is a key to buzzbaiting success.

Many of the deadliest buzzbaits never have appeared on the national scene. Like the Lunker Lure, they were hand made in garages and basements in lots of a couple hundred and sold to friends or in local tackle shops. A favorite bait around Oklahoma that still has a cult following among avid buzzbaiters was the Dixon Buzzbait made by John Dixon of Bache, Oklahoma.

The hand tuning and wire twisting process can be the thing that triggers bass. A subtle bend to the wire frame, a turn in the blade, or an off-center hole in a blade creates special wobbles, squeaks, and other effects that cause bass to attack.

Buzzbaits attract strikes with a multi-sensory array of cues. The blade sputtering on the surface creates a loud sound that's transmitted through the air and through the water. The lure's churning and bubbling produce underwater vibrations that bass detect with their lateral line, even when they're buried in wood or weedcover. Visually, a buzzbait's appeal is in its trail of bubbles, flashing blade, and pulsing skirt.

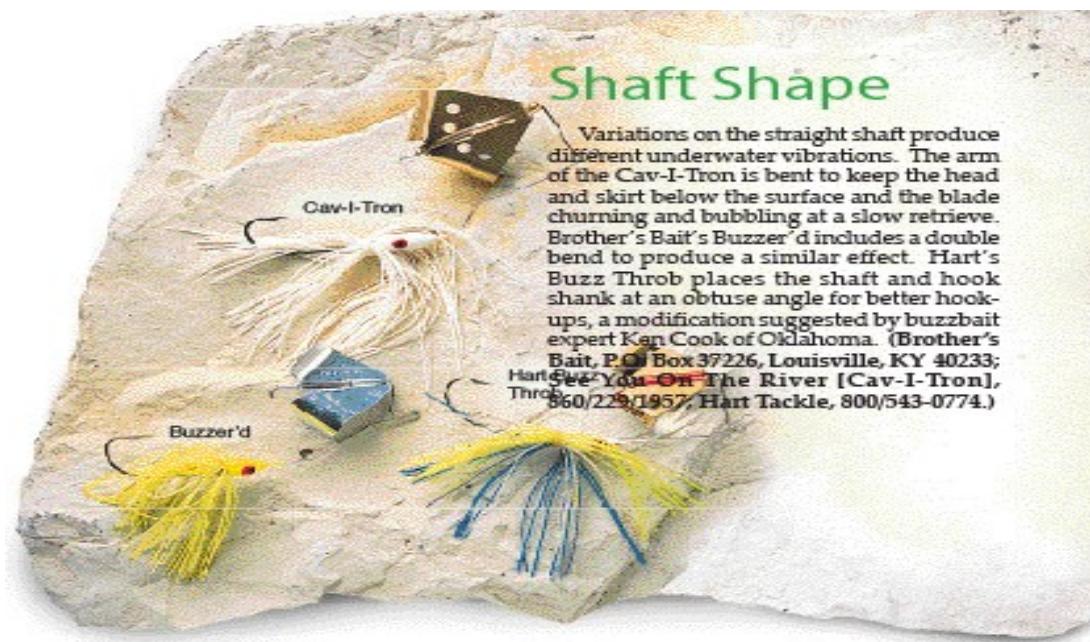
The combination of sound and vibration seems critical for buzzbaits, just as it's central to the attraction of crankbaits and spinnerbaits. A buzzbait blade turns as it's pulled through

the water, a motion that puts torque and vibration on the wire shaft. The wire transmits the various pitches of sound and vibration into the underwater world.

The original Lunker Lure was designed to run a little off-balance, so the bait shudders as it buzzes along. Hold a Lunker Lure and blow into the blade, and you feel it pulse in your fingers. Other models have used similar strategies to create an attractive cadence, though on many models, the blades spin smoothly on the shaft, an action that may also draw strikes.

Choice of blade shape, position, gauge of wire form, and shape all contribute to a buzzbait's underwater vibrations and thus its effectiveness. Placing two blades, each tuned to turn in opposite directions, in sequence or on separate arms, creates two types of vibrations. The two blades hold the lure on the surface at a slow retrieve. Also, the two blades pulling in opposite directions make the lure run straight.

This metal-on-metal action also creates sound, the magical squeak that avid buzzbaiters look for in a favorite bait. "It's the squeak that scored," says In-Fisherman co-founder Ron Lindner. Zone Lures' Mega Squeak has a built-in squeak, and the new Terminator Titanium Buzzbait uses a brass crimp to increase squeakiness.



Buzzbait specialists rarely use a buzzer right out of the package. "Tape a couple to your exterior mirrors when you head to the lake," recommends Ron Lindner. "But don't forget them out there. A half hour of moderate-speed driving is more than enough time. A buzzbait can be broken in by fishing it, but that may take awhile."

"As the blade spins, the metal wears and bends, giving the blade more wobble. This new action makes the lure squeak and also creates a different vibration pattern. But be careful, for a bait can be ruined by holding it at the wrong angle during the break-in period."

“The length of the break-in period depends on the design and quality of the blade and also its attachment to the wire arm. Cheaper buzzbaits can be broken in quickly, but they also break with use. But cheaper blades produce a different pitch, and that’s sometimes what the fish want. And don’t be afraid to bend the wire shaft.”

Strategies for Lakes

“There aren’t many tricks to buzzbait fishing in fall,” Jim Lindner observes. “It isn’t necessary to be a pro to catch huge fish with this lure. On shallower flats, I choose a small single-blade buzzbait and retrieve it as slowly as possible. Noise isn’t the key here, and a loud bait can turn off fish. I like a bait like the 1/4-ounce Norman’s Triple-Wing Buzzer in these conditions.

“Largemouths whack a buzzbait fished over flats that run 6 to 8 feet deep, but in deeper water, I like a larger, noisier bait.



The Blue Fox Fox Roland

Martin Double Buzzer creates a ruckus at slow retrieves and runs straight, due to its counter-rotating blades. During Indian Summer, with a succession of calm, sunny afternoons in the upper 60°F or even 70°F range, bluegills and bass suspend off the outside weedlines where vegetation remains green and standing tall. They often hold from 4 to 8 feet down over 12 to 14 feet of water, where they’re visible in clear lakes. A small buzzbait can be deadly.”

Ron Lindner expresses a slightly different opinion on buzzbait selection: “I like models with a metal clacker on the arm. In any conditions, I like a single-blade model in fall. Noisy double buzzers are for summer. I like 1/4- and 3/8-ounce models for the most part.

Small buzzers don't seem to create enough commotion." It should be noted, however, that in spring, summer, and fall, many river anglers prefer 1/8- and even 1/16-ounce buzzbaits, like those from M & N Lures and Old Can'Tucky Boy.

"From what I've seen," Ron continues, "no rule for fall buzzbaiting is absolute, except that the bait must be retrieved slowly. Even a slow buzzbait retrieve covers a lot of water. Experiment with lure size, vibration cadence, and color. Fish a productive flat and you may quickly catch the most active fish in just half an hour, including sometimes 4 or 5 good ones.

"Return a few hours later and more fish may respond to the bait. Any bait that runs over the fishs' heads can attract them from a distance if they're in a feeding mood. Contrast that to a worm or jig that must be presented close to the fish to be effective, particularly in thick cover.

"In fall, bass bites on a buzzbait can be, well, lethargic. I almost always add a trailer hook, held in place with surgical tubing or a rubberized coating over the hook eye, like Lindy-Little Joe's trailer hooks. Concerning rods, any good baitcasting rod works fine. I like a 6 1/2- or 7-foot rod to help make long casts and to put pressure on bass to keep them from burying into the weeds.

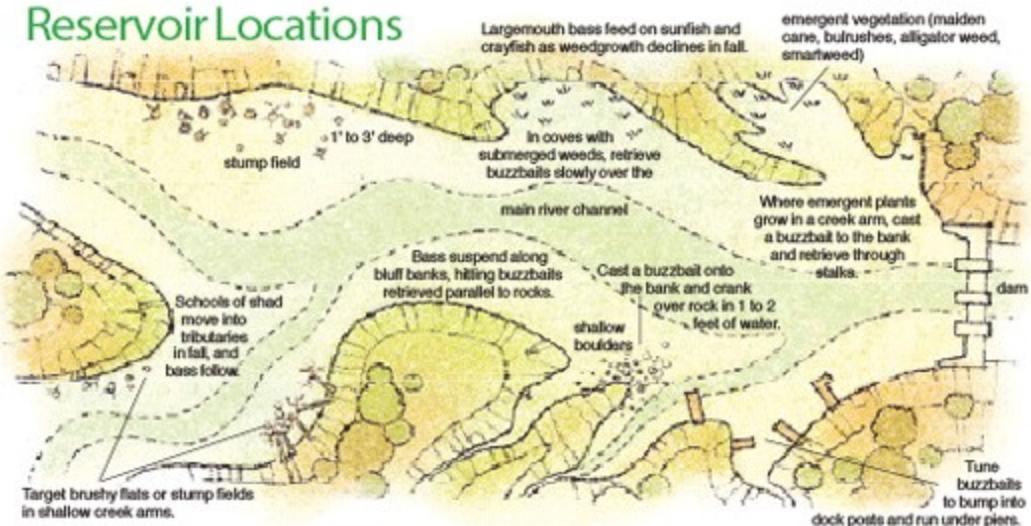
"Reels with medium-speed retrieve ratios help keep the bait moving slowly. Depending on the density of weeds on the flat, I spool with 14-, 17-, or 20-pound Trilene XT. For fishing through bulrushes on a flat—a great target area—use stout equipment. I like the power and weed-cutting ability of braided superlines, but they make pulling the bait away from bass too easy."

Strategies for Reservoirs

In reservoirs with substantial weedcover, fall buzzbait patterns evolve as they do in natural lakes. As vegetation on shallow flats thins, these flats become more attractive to bass. The minnows and small sunfish that were hidden in the dense jungle are vulnerable, and bass move from deep areas to feed. In impoundments with dense vegetation, largemouth bass are opportunistic feeders. They take crayfish from weedy habitats, along with sunfish, darters, perch, and other fish species.

Reservoirs with less weedgrowth experience a different pattern of fall movement, but one that also provides prime opportunities for buzzbaits. In many reservoirs from the Plains to the Carolinas, turbid water limits plant growth or even prohibits it. Some impoundments are moderately clear but lack submerged plants because the bottom is unsuitable or because plant species haven't been introduced.

Reservoir Locations



In these waters, the food chain for bass is shad based, with a huge biomass of shad feeding on dense zooplankton, which feed on phytoplankton that thrives in the absence of submerged plants. Other potential bass forage, such as sunfish, topminnows, sculpins, and darters are less abundant than in weedy waters.

A fall shad migration and human-induced effects combine to bring largemouths bass into shallow water, sometimes less than a foot deep. This scenario begins with water temperatures falling into the mid-60°F range, stirring threadfin and gizzard shad to move from their open-water haunts toward the bank. Schools of baitfish move into main-lake coves or run into tributary creeks, and bass follow, moving as shallow as the shad lure them.

At the same time, many reservoirs begin a gradual drawdown to winter pool. Prime cover such as brush, fallen trees, docks, and stumps lie in shallower and shallower water. Bass seem loath to leave their favorite haunts until they're high and dry or baitfish move deeper as winter approaches.

Cooling water sets the stage for one of the hottest buzzbait bites of the year. Bass pro Jim Morton used a buzzbait called the Spunky Bug made in his hometown of McCallister, Oklahoma, to win the 1993 Oklahoma BASSMASTER Invitational tournament on Grand Lake in early November. Grand Lake is an off-color shad-based lake that holds largemouth in shallow cover year-round. "When that cold front blew through, I got a hunch the buzzer could be a real ace," Morton recalls.



"In mid-October, the lake had been around 70°F. A rainy cold snap dropped it to about 62°F at the start of the tournament. Rain and air temperatures around 40°F numbed us all, reminding us of winter. But relating conditions above the surface to what's going on below always is a mistake. We were miserable, but the bass were basking in ideal temperatures, and the overcast conditions and low barometer reading had them biting well."

"On the third day of the tournament, the air temperature fell to 27°F and it snowed so hard the tournament almost was canceled. But the lake was still 55°F. Many contestants tried to catch bass as though it were winter, but the fish were ready for mid-fall patterns. And on Grand Lake and many other waters, that means buzzbaits."

"I've been relying on this fall buzzbait pattern for several years, ever since my wife Linda proved its productivity. We'd signed up for a husband-and-wife tournament, but the morning dawned 39°F and raining. She wanted to forget it, but I more or less dragged her into the boat."

"We had our rain hoods pulled tight down over our ears as I happened to look back to see her tossing a buzzbait, a lure she loves to throw. 'Sugar, you'd be better off with a crankbait,' I urged. But she'd have none of it. 'You dragged me out here so don't you dare tell me what to throw,' she replied."

"Well that shut me up until she started hammering the fish with that thing. By the end of the day, she'd caught 9 of our 10 keepers, and we won the tournament. After a while, I tied on a buzzbait, but she still outfished me 4 to 1. She'd make a cast, put her head down to keep the rain out, and just crawl that lure along. Suddenly, a bass would just suck it under and she'd have it hooked. Since then, I've forced myself to retrieve a buzzbait as slowly as possible during conditions like those."

"In the Oklahoma Invitational, the big largemouths were holding among large rocks just offshore in water from 12 to 24 inches deep. Smaller bass were holding from 3 to 5 feet deep, and I caught some of them on crankbaits. But for the big ones, I'd cast the buzzbait onto shore and start retrieving. As the water temperature dropped day by day, I slowed my retrieve even further. Some of my biggest bass hit within 18 inches of the bank. I

always use a trailer hook in this situation, but in the tournament, every bass had the main hook.

“While I’ve found this ultrashallow buzzbait presentation effective in off-color impoundments, in fall it also works in clearer reservoirs like Lake of the Ozarks. Most anglers can’t believe how shallow the fish move.”



Veteran bass pro Rob Kilby of Arkansas notes another fall pattern for clear impoundments that’s often overlooked by anglers who move far up creek channels or into the backs of coves. “Look for bluff banks,” Kilby says, “and run the buzzer so it almost clips the rocks.

“Bass suspend along these walls in fall, apparently in position to attack schools of shad that pass along creek channels swinging along rock banks. They’re looking up and will hit a buzzbait hard. You’ll catch some spotted bass that way, too,” says Kilby, long-time buzzbait aficionado and designer of Terminator’s new titanium buzzbait.

Kilby also has refined color recommendations for reservoirs, based on water color. In clear water, he uses light skirts (clear, smoke, or white) and silver blades during sunny conditions. On cloudy days, he switches to black with silver blades.

“In stained water, I use black or brown buzzbaits almost exclusively. Often the fish will boil at white or chartreuse baits, but switch to black and they eat it. Also, compact baits with a moderate-size blade and a rather short shaft are the key in fall.”

Buzzbait popularity has seen several cycles of waxing and waning since the Lunker Lure hit the market. We’ve been through a lull during the last couple years. Time is right for a big harvest of lunkers. Whether you choose the venerable Lunker Lure or a new-style buzzbait like the Terminator, Headbanger, or Cav-I-Tron, get out there and raise a ruckus.

(Article Courtesy of www.infisherman.com)