

Three Ways To Crank Up Fall Bass Fishing

by Rod Hunter



MAN-MADE RESERVOIRS

Man-made impoundments can be classified into two basic types — highland and lowland.

The former are characterized by the abruptness of their depth changes, rugged contours, and a notable lack of aquatic vegetation. The primary cover for bass in a highland reservoir is rock and wood.

Lowland reservoirs are normally significantly shallower in their maximum depths, frequently contain a variety of aquatic plants as well as standing timber. Also, they often are crisscrossed by a maze of twisting submerged creek channels, in addition to the main river channel that was dammed to create the reservoir.

The terrain can vary greatly, but in either type of man-made reservoir the behavior of the bass won't. This month the baitfish are moving into shallow creek arms, and the bass are following them.

On a highland reservoir the migration route from their deeper summer homes to the creek arms can either be tapering main-lake points or bluff walls.

If bluff walls are the available pathways, those with a series of ledges are normally preferred over sheer walls. Shad-finished floater/diver crankbaits that run in the 12-foot-plus range can be deadly on this topography.

Experienced anglers frequently pull their boat tight to the bluff and run their baits parallel to it. This keeps the bait in the strike zone longer than casting shoreward to the bluff. Actively feeding bass take a steadily retrieved crankbait, but in the majority of situations an erratic retrieve generates more strikes.

One tactic is a stop-and-go retrieve — crank the bait down to depth, pause, let it float upwards a couple of seconds, crank it down again, and repeat the pause. Many strikes come on the pause, and some of the bass may try to take the rod out of your hands!

Another productive tactic is to very slightly bend the eye where the line attaches to make the bait run to one side. If the bluff wall is on your left, bending the eye left makes the bait repeatedly bang into the bluff wall on the retrieve. A crankbait striking an object and bouncing off it is a strong “strike trigger,” regardless of the depth or cover. Tuning your crankbait to run slightly to one side is one way to achieve that on this type of structure.

Another option along bluff walls, and sometimes a more productive one, is tossing any of the numerous countdown, sinking crankbaits like the Countdown Rapala, their newer Rapala Twitchin’ Rap, or the ubiquitous Rat-L-Trap baits. Each of these lures sinks a certain distance per second at rest. It varies with lure makes, but once an angler figures the rate out, those baits can be cast, counted down to the depth required, and then retrieved.

Sometimes a straight, smooth, retrieve gets strikes. But a better option is to count the bait down to the desired depth and treat it like a jig; lift the rod sharply to make the bait dart up, pause to let it sink. That erratic action is also a strike trigger and you can keep the lure at the right depth to work a particular ledge, or at whatever depth bass are holding on a straight bluff wall. Many hits with this retrieve come as the lure falls on a slack line.

If points are the prime staging areas for creek arms, deep-diving crankbaits are also an option. But many anglers find the countdown models a better bet here, too. By anchoring on the shallow shoreward end of the point these baits can be cast, allowed to sink to the bottom, and then retrieved up the point in an erratic sweep-and-fall retrieve.

They stay in the strike zone the entire retrieve and you can quickly determine just where on the point the bass are holding.

The same pattern can be applied on lowland reservoirs, but the depth and type of cover can be different.

When bass begin their migration to the creek arms, their first stop is often on main channel ridges leading to a creek. These ridges may be bare, or hold standing timber, submerged stumps, or vegetation like hydrilla or milfoil. If hard cover exists, diving

crankbaits that run in the 5- to 9-foot range can be ideal. Banging these through wood triggers strikes.

If the ridges have soft cover, bringing the boat parallel to the cover and “burning” a countdown crankbait like the Rat-L-Trap, Sebile Flat Shad or Rattlin’ Rapala, along the outer edge can be deadly. A high-speed lure gives the bass little time to decide whether to hit it or not, and their natural predatory instinct often win out.

Savvy anglers often favor the 3/4- or 1-ounce models for these lures. The bass are eating larger forage, so the size makes sense, and the bigger baits can be retrieved faster without broaching.

Once the bass actually move deep into the creek arms, the same lures and tactics continue to work when applied to similar cover.

NATURAL LAKES

Bass in natural lakes also are feeding heavily this month, but their movement patterns aren’t as predictable as reservoir bass. Some mostly smaller bass move shallow, while some others gather in schools in open water and chase shad.

However, many bass — especially the larger mature bass we’re looking for — position on readily identifiable cover. That can be off shore vegetation like hydrilla, or the outer edge of the weed lines. In that latter situation points extending out from the main body of vegetation are prime spots.

Crankbaits are again the top lures, and the Rat-L-Trap heads the list. It’s a top choice for open water schooling bass, but also very effective when fished parallel to the outer edge of weed lines and offshore vegetation edges. The lures can be even more effective if you pay attention to the wind.

Wind moves shad, and savvy anglers start their search on those weed lines that the wind has been blowing onto for a few days.

Wind can also position bass. In the absence of current bass often face into the wind. Expert anglers have learned that a lure retrieved quickly, coming from behind and above the bass to flash into its field of vision, and then moving rapidly away from the bass, can trigger a totally reactive strike. It’s much like dangling a ball of string in front of a cat. Putting the wind to your back and running these baits quickly within a couple of feet of the surface creates that reaction strike.

Other very useful crankbaits are the recently introduced shallow runners, commonly called “wake baits.” These are short, fat, and feature a very abbreviated lip. The Bagley Bulgin’ B, and Mann’s Walker or Minus-1 are examples, although many more makers now offer them. None run deeper than 2 feet, and most operate in the 1-foot or less depth range. At either depth they look just like a wounded shad struggling along, and bass love easy targets.

These shallow-runners can be deadly when fished around weed line points consisting of scattered hard stemmed vegetation, or on wooded points. The short lip bangs off hard cover with few hang ups.

Also consider them during the morning hours on the edges of offshore grass beds where cuts, pockets, and scattered outside vegetation exist.

RIVERS

Unlike bass in still water, river fish — whether they are in free-flowing or tidal waters — don't do much migrating during the fall. They don't have to. The current brings them their food and they can afford to be homebodies.

Regardless of which type of river you are fishing, if you found bass along a particular bank during the summer, they will be there in the fall. But, they may have moved shallower, and there are some key areas to focus on.

The outside bends of any river are prime bass habitat because the current flows more strongly. On free-flowing rivers, decades of water flow have toppled trees and left exposed roots. These are prime cover for a bass. They can slip behind a piece of wood, be out of the main current flow, and yet nail any food item that comes by. Putting your boat tight to the shoreline on the down current side and running a floater/diver crankbait down that cover edge with the current can be deadly!

If fall rains have raised water levels, bass may move from the deeper edge of the outside bends and into the shallow flooded trees on the shore of the bend. For anglers who can make short, accurate casts into the flooded tree roots, a wake bait can be an ideal tool.

Another spot that should always be checked is anywhere an intersecting creek enters the river. The conflicting currents create an ideal feeding situation, where many bass may gather at the drop in front of the creek mouth. A diving crankbait cast into the creek and worked over the drop is likely to be hit.

If no strikes result, prospect the area within 50 yards down current of the creek mouth. Intersecting creeks are magnets for river bass.

So too, fallen treetops lying over onto the river are good cover. They make perfect bass houses, where the fish can lie inside the tree, out of the current, yet nail anything that passes by. Savvy anglers have learned that if these are approached from the up current side, a shallow-running crankbait can be cast to the outer edge of the tree, held in place by the current, and danced there long enough to entice a bass out.

Lastly, don't ignore surface schooling bass. They often lay in wait along mid-river bars and make explosive strikes on any school of shad that passes by. The countdown crankbaits are a top choice here.

It doesn't take a large selection of crankbaits to be successful during the fall. And that's regardless of the water-type you're fishing. A simple selection of floater/divers, countdowns, and wake baits give you three ways to crank up fall bass.

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