



# Why Fishing **CLEAR WATER** Can Be Fun In The Sun

*Story and Photos By John N. Felsler*

**S**parkling clear water looks beautiful, but it can cause nightmares for bass fishermen. Sure, anglers can often see big bass, but that usually means big bass can see them as well, making fishing tough.

“Bass are very conscious of movement above the surface because they have to watch for eagles, ospreys, pelicans, cormorants and other birds looking to eat them,” says Shaw Grigsby, host of “One More Cast With Shaw Grigsby” on the Outdoor Life Network.

Grigsby often fishes the notoriously clear waters near his home in Gainesville, Fla. “If people can see bass, bass can see them through clear water,” he adds. “Keep movements to a minimum because fish pick up on movements. If a human shadow falls on a fish, it might spook. If it sees an arm raised to make a cast, it might spook.”

Stalking bass in clear water almost resembles hunting big game across the plains. Anglers spot their quarry and decide how to approach it before it notices them and disappears. With only moments to present a bait with-

out losing the element of surprise, anglers must plan their stalks carefully. Riding in big, noisy, colorful bass boats across open water with very little cover makes that proposition difficult. Taking a tip from trout anglers fishing tiny mountain streams, bass anglers might crouch in their boats and make long, low, sidearm casts or use the sun to their advantage.

“When I’m in clear water, I try to put the sun behind me off one shoulder,” Grigsby says. “That allows me to see a fish with polarized sunglasses. If I’m looking into the sun, I can’t see through the glare.”

Typically, Grigsby will make a low, sidearm cast just over the water. He uses a light spinning rod and lets the rod flex to propel the bait. Like a skipping stone, the bait skips across the surface as if another bass were chasing it.

“Bass are extremely competitive,” Grigsby says. “If they don’t beat their fellow fish to forage, they don’t eat. Sometimes they hit a bait while it’s skipping across the surface.”

Anglers fishing anywhere should keep their movements to a minimum,

but this becomes critical in very clear water. Avoid stomping around in your boat, dropping objects or banging locker lids, because fish can feel vibrations coming through boat hulls. Also, keep talking to a minimum because sound carries great distances over water. In addition, run your trolling motor constantly but on low settings. A steady hum from a trolling motor would less likely spook bass than the sporadic jarring of kicking motors on and off periodically.

Bass don’t always disappear, even in the clearest water. In shallow water, fish naturally go to the thickest cover they can find. Feeling secure in their protective lairs, bass might remain in place, only fleeing as a last resort. Anglers can often approach fairly close to cover holding fish.

Overhead or canopy cover offers bass the most protection in clear water. Fallen trees, boat docks or thick weed mats keep bass hidden from predatory birds. In addition, the shade from horizontal cover provides bass some relief from broiling summer sunshine. In clear water, anglers who fish cover that others might ignore could put more bass

in their boats.

“In clear water, my philosophy has always been to find the heaviest cover possible,” says veteran bass pro Jimmy Houston. “One of the best places where I’ve had success when fishing clear water is around moored boats, not necessarily around a dock. Boats on anchor or tied to a mooring buoy away from the bank give fish overhead cover and create shade. Usually, these places give bass access to deep water where they can flee and shallow water where they can feed. I’ve also had a lot of success fishing where people beach their boats around houses and campgrounds. Bass get under those boats for cover and shade. Around those areas, bass are used to activity, so they don’t spook as easily.”

In the summer heat, clear-water bass that can’t find shade may go deep to avoid the sun. However, they return to the shallows at night or during low-light conditions to hunt.

Points and drop-offs offer bass easy access to both deep and shallow water. A sloping point with some secondary cover, such as fallen trees, rocks, stumps or perhaps a boat dock, could attract bass.

Fish frequently suspend just off a point or over the lip of a drop-off. Without the protection of dense cover, suspended bass in clear water might spook more easily. If so, anglers need to approach cautiously and use lures that fly, such as lipless crankbaits, spinnerbaits or large topwaters, on light line for long-range presentations.



*In clear water, bass often move to some type of cover, such as a stump or log.*

“Bass suspended in open water are some of the most difficult fish to catch,” Houston says. “When they suspend in open water, they don’t allow fishermen to get too close to them. Anglers need to stay well off that point, farther than people normally do. Most people fish from the point out to deep water. The only way to catch those fish is to start twice as far away and make really long casts. In that case, a Zara Spook or a large spinnerbait is very effective because people can throw them so far.”

Wind can help anglers approach points, shorelines, weedbeds or other cover in clear lakes. A stiff breeze chopping the water disguises the silhouettes of approaching anglers and camouflages their lures. In clear water, anglers don’t want bass to see lures very well. Waves lapping against shorelines, logs or rocks also create natural noises and muffle the sounds of approaching anglers. In effect, wind noise “jams” man-made noise in the way that military forces send signals to disrupt enemy sensors.

“Bass are more active on the windy side in clear water because it reduces light penetration into the water,” says Kevin VanDam, a former Bassmaster Classic champion from Kalamazoo, Mich. “Bass are low-light feeders. In low-light conditions, they have a big advantage over their prey species.”

First thing in the morning or late in the evening, VanDam fishes faster to cover a lot of water. It’s the same in windy, overcast conditions.

“During bright, calm times, I fish finesse presentations,” he says. “When I fish a point, I fish both sides, but I prefer the side with direct wind. That’s the highest percentage area.”

Wind also creates currents that stimulate fish. Waves crashing against objects add dissolved oxygen to the water and often cool the shallows.

In addition, wind pushes plankton against shorelines. Shad and other baitfish feed upon plankton.

Waves may also disorient baitfish

## Jimmy Houston's Clear-Water Tactics

Common wisdom says that anglers fishing in very clear water should use realistic lures in natural colors. That certainly works, but veteran bass pro Jimmy Houston offers the opposite advice.

"Use both ends of the spectrum," he says. "I either use colors that really blend in well or colors that really stand out. Sometimes I use translucent colors in clear water. At other times, I use extremely bright colors like pink or a rainbow trout color. Ironically, the rainbow trout color blends in with clear water. Blues and grays also blend well in clear water. A bubble gum color almost glows like it's on fire when it comes through the water. It looks much larger than it really is."

Houston also goes against the grain when it comes to "stealthy fishing." Naturally, he doesn't want to make unnecessary noise in either clear or muddy water, but he says that noise doesn't necessarily spook fish. As long as fish can find good cover, they feel secure and won't move unless absolutely necessary.

"If fish feel secure, people can get fairly close to them," Houston says. "I've caught a lot of fish in clear water only 6 to 8 feet away from the rod tip, but those fish were secure where they were. I've had times when I snagged a lure in a brushpile and went to the pile to retrieve it. I have even thrust my rod tip down in the water and thrashed it around to dislodge the bait. Then, I back off and catch a fish out of that same brushpile. I would think I've chased every fish out of that pile, but they feel secure in the heavy cover and don't move far." — *John Felsher*



looks real, slow down so bass can get a good look at it. If it doesn't look like something natural, work it fast so bass don't get a good look at it. In really clear water, it's important to throw baits that are not super flashy. I throw a lot of shad colors or translucent baits that resemble natural forage."

Although it doesn't actually resemble anything a bass might eat, a tube may imitate several types of forage. Skipped across the water with a side-arm cast, it might look like a baitfish trying to escape a hungry bass. As it sinks, it often spirals down, mimicking a dying shad. When dragged slowly along the bottom, it simulates a crayfish. Light and compact, a tube can also penetrate the thickest cover where other baits would likely snag.

"A tube is one of my favorite lures for clear water," VanDam says. "I generally like to show smaller profiles on lures in clear water. I also like to use a finesse worm or a small jig. I use smaller lures that look like real forage and work them slowly. Even with lures, I try to keep noise to a minimum. I like more subtle baits for clear water and don't like loud rattles or noisy baits."

Since bass feed primarily by sight in clear water, slim jerkbaits also work well. Fished around weedbeds or shorelines, they add flash without making much commotion and resemble natural baitfish. Moving erratically, a jerkbait draws attention from great distances because it looks like a crippled baitfish and thus an easy meal. They provoke reaction strikes from fish that really

and knock lizards, frogs, insects or other morsels from brush. Breakers pounding a shoreline might rip crawfish or other creatures from their hiding spots. Bass congregate where they find abundant food, comfortable temperatures and oxygen.

"In the summer, most bass go deep in clear lakes because of oxygen and temperature reasons," advises Alton Jones, a veteran Bassmaster Classic competitor. "Fish position themselves into the wind. I put the boat gunwale about a foot from the shore and make long casts parallel to the bank. One of my favorite techniques then is to run a spinnerbait as fast as possible along a steep, rocky bank. I use a ½- or ¾-ounce willow-leaf spinnerbait because I want speed without lift. I like white and chartreuse with double No. 4 and No. 3 gold willow-leaf blades. I reel fast and steady."

Besides reducing noise, anglers might also want to minimize their tackle when fishing clear water. Generally, use smaller, more realistic lures in natural colors. Try shad or translucent hues or colors that approximate the color of water and work baits a bit faster than normal.

"There are two ways to catch bass when the water is clear," VanDam

says. "Show them something that looks real and natural in natural colors or use their reactive instincts with fast-moving baits. The more clear the water, the more natural and subtle the presentation needs to be. If a bait



*When approaching spooky, suspended bass in clear water, anglers should use lures that can fly, such as a large topwater lure, on light line for long-range presentations.*

can't see them very well.

Often, bass fishermen might use tubes and jerkbaits in tandem. Moving slowly along a shoreline or weedbed, anglers may look for movement, fins, shadows or other indicators of fish. They could toss shad-colored

jerkbaits into likely spots, hoping for reaction strikes. If bass appear or miss the lure, you might follow up immediately with a more subtle bait such as a tube or a finesse worm.

"Usually when I'm going down the banks, I like to throw a Strike King Wild Shiner hard jerkbait or a soft-plastic jerkbait that fish can see for long distances," Grigsby says. "They think it's a real minnow."

If he sees a fish and doesn't catch it, his preferred bait is a tube.

"If I see a big mat of vegetation blown against the bank or a fallen tree, I fish a tube around that cover," Grigsby says. "I let it sink to the bottom and let it sit for a couple of seconds. Then, I barely lift my rod and crawl it along the bottom. Most people want to hop it up and down. That's what a crayfish does only when

it's spooked. Most of the time, it's just crawling around on the bottom."

If you see fish, don't drop a lure on top of them. Bass can see quite well in clear water. Try to determine the direction the fish is moving or facing and cast about 10 feet in front of it. A lure splashing above its head might spook a bass in shallow water.

In clear water, bass also follow baits long distances. They might observe a bait for quite a while before deciding to strike it. If they see a slow-moving bait, they probably don't feel much need to hurry, figuring they can catch it at any time. So work your baits all the way to the boat, pausing occasionally to let the fish catch up. ♣

#### Manufacturers Mentioned

**Bass Pro Shops**  
1-800-BASSPRO  
[www.basspro.com](http://www.basspro.com)

**Berkley (Pure Fishing)**  
1-800-BERKLEY  
[www.purefishing.com](http://www.purefishing.com)

**Strike King Lure Company**  
(901) 853-1455  
[www.strikeking.com](http://www.strikeking.com)