

Lake Crowded?



10 WAYS TO BE SURE YOU DON'T STRIKE OUT!

Story and Photos By Don Wirth

“**T**hat’s the last time I go bass fishing in the summer,” my buddy grumbled. I’d called him to hear about his Saturday trip, and he had nothing but bad news to report. “First, I had to wait in line an hour to launch my boat. Then once I got in the water, it was total mayhem. There were two zillion jet skis zip-zapping everywhere, and all those ski boats made wakes big enough to surf on. Every time I did manage to find a spot with some quiet water, there were a dozen bass boats lined up to fish it. Next weekend, I’m playing golf instead.”

Unfortunately, this scenario has become the norm on many lakes nationwide during the summer months. The burgeoning popularity of both bass fishing and recreational boating results in hordes of boats on the water, especially on summer weekends. Most of the places where you normally catch bass are either overrun with other anglers or made virtually unfishable due to heavy boat traffic and rough water.

But you don’t have to let crowded conditions ruin your summer bass



A small, portable boat can help you avoid the summer crowds by allowing you access to remote bass waters.

outings. Take the advice of several expert anglers on where and how they catch bass amidst all those other fishermen and pleasure boaters. Try their tips this weekend on your home waters for a more enjoyable summer bass-fishing experience.

Target Outer Edges Of Fish Attractors

“Many lakes have large fish attractors consisting of brushpiles or tree limbs that were placed there by state fisheries agencies,” notes Kentucky Lake guide Garry Mason. “Primarily intended as crappie habitat, these attractors are normally marked with a sign, making them easy for anglers to locate. In summer, you’re likely to see a dozen boats circled around a good-sized brushpile on any given day.”

Mason’s tactic is to ignore the thick concentration of brush at the center of the attractor and instead fish isolated pieces of wood scattered around the outer perimeter of the cover.

“On windy days, crappie fishermen will often drop anchor in the heavy brush only to get their anchor hung up in the cover,” Mason explains. “Sometimes it’s stuck so bad they’ll have to crank up their outboard to pull it free. This often drags brush and limbs out away from the center of the attractor, leaving it scattered around the outer perimeter. Bass will hold around this isolated cover, using it

to ambush panfish entering or exiting the attractor.”

Mason uses his graph to pinpoint this scattered wood, then fishes it with a crankbait, plastic worm or jig.

Fish Secondary Launch Ramps

Most large lakes have several launch ramps. Oklahoma bass pro Ken Cook has found that secondary ramps can provide incredible bass action in summer.

“A launch ramp is a great, but often overlooked man-made structure for bass,” he says. “Paved ramps develop a slick coating of algae beneath the surface that attracts fish fry and shad. Trailers moving in and out of the lake stir up the water, uprooting crayfish and insect larvae. All this means good feeding potential for bass.”

In summer tournaments, Cook often makes a milk run of what he calls secondary ramps, those with limited launch traffic due to their small size, remote location, marginal condition or limited parking.

“I’ll move from one secondary ramp to another, fishing them quickly with a crankbait or spinnerbait,” he says. “I’ll make my first casts shallow, then gradually work my way out into deeper water. It’s not uncommon to catch two or three good bass at every ramp you come to. Often you’ll catch your biggest fish off boat ramps later in the day after several trailers have muddied up the water. This provides great concealment for bass.”

Look For Baitfish Schools In Pockets

Most weekend bass anglers are content with pounding the banks, which explains why you may have to take a number to get on a prime stretch of shoreline in summer. But sometimes the biggest bass are over your shoulder, suspending in the middle of pockets (indentations) that occur along the bank.

“Baitfish will gravitate toward shallow water in summer to feed on plankton, but boat traffic and angler pressure will keep them off the banks,” says North Carolina pro Marty Stone. “Instead, they’ll school up in the middle of those pockets and small coves that can be found in almost every lake. Bass will move in to gorge themselves on this abundant food supply.”

Stone works this pattern with

3 Bonus Tips For Coping With Crowds

Every summer, bass expert Dick Mericle scores impressive catches from northern Michigan’s scenic lakes in spite of heavy boat traffic and hordes of vacationing anglers.

“The way you approach the water mentally will have a great deal to do with your success in crowded summer conditions,” he says. “If you let boat traffic annoy you, it’ll adversely affect your fishing and ruin your time on the water. I try to accept it as just another factor to take into account when determining my fishing pattern, like the wind direction or the water temperature.”

Mericle offers the following tips for coping with crowds on the water during the height of the summer vacation season.

● **Weekdays vs. Weekends** — “I try to do most of my summer fishing on weekdays instead of on weekends,” Mericle says. “The boat traffic can still be heavy, seeing as how I live in a resort area, but it’s never as bad as on weekends. If I do fish weekends, I’ll usually stick to smaller lakes with less-developed launch facilities. The bigger ski boats and cruisers can’t launch there.”

● **Anchor Down** — In Michigan, as in many other states, it’s a law that other boats must give an anchored boat 100 feet of right of way. If he’s fishing an offshore drop-off or hump, Mericle will throw out an anchor to keep other boats away.

● **Launch Close To Fishing Areas** — “All those boat wakes can make for a rough ride to your fishing hole, especially if you’re in a small boat,” Mericle says. “Choose an area of the lake that holds good bass potential, then pick the closest launch site to that area, rather than getting soaked and pounded by making a long run through rough water.” — *Don Wirth*

either a lipless vibrating crankbait or a topwater lure, depending on how deep the bait school is suspended.

“If my graph shows the bait deeper than 4 feet or so, I’ll cast the lipless crankbait into the baitfish school and retrieve it with short hops,” he explains. “If the bait is shallower and the water is clear, I’ll run a chugger or prop bait over the surface. This pattern is often totally overlooked and can produce some quality fish.”

Fish Banks Near Canal Entrances

Michigan bass expert Dick Mericle knows that canals leading into a marina or port are often crowded during summer with a seemingly unending procession of fishing and pleasure boats seven days a week.

“Boats heading out of the canal for open water usually take off for parts unknown as soon as they leave the no-wake zone,” Mericle says. “What’s amazing to me is that the banks adjacent to the mouth of the canal are typically totally ignored by anglers. They can offer some incredible bass fishing.”

Due to the intense boat traffic and heavy wave action at canal entrances, adjacent banks are often lined with riprap, which bass prowl in search of

crayfish. Mericle usually probes these rocks with a tube bait, but if the normally clear water has been churned up, he opts for a spinnerbait.

“I’ve caught some of my biggest smallmouth off these banks, sometimes right under the noses of passing boaters,” he says.

Seek Out Surface Scum

Because it clogs their hooks and coats their lures, most bass anglers avoid that sticky, slimy scum that forms on the surface of shallow coves on many lakes during midsummer. That’s not the case with Steve Dodson. The Tennessee angler looks for the biggest, nastiest-looking patches of surface scum he can find.

“In my area, the surface temperature of the lake can climb into the 90s by August, yet bass will remain shallow if they have a thick coating of surface algae to hide under,” Dodson notes. “The sunnier and hotter it gets, the stronger this pattern becomes. Bass may scatter out to feed early and late in the day, but you can bet they’ll be under that scum when the sun gets high.”

Dodson’s favorite tactic for fishing surface scum is to drag a rubber frog over the top of the slop.

“Keep the frog moving slowly and steadily,” he suggests. “This lets the fish home in on the bait easier. Then when you get a strike, count to three before setting the hook hard.”

Try Shallow-Running Crankbaits On Pressured Banks

Ever notice how 95 percent of the anglers fishing your home lake on a given summer day are beating the banks, and how 95 percent of

those anglers are casting the same old lures (usually spinnerbaits or plastic worms)? Mississippi bass pro Paul Elias has, which is why he is such a believer in shallow-running crankbaits.

“I can often get on a bank right behind local guys who are throwing spinnerbaits and worms, and catch big bass on a shallow crankbait,” he says.

A fat, short-billed crankbait like Mann’s 1-Minus or Bandit’s Foot-loose covers the same depth zone as the worms and spinnerbaits most other bank-beaters are using but has

a totally different look.

“Bass on pressured lakes become conditioned to seeing the same baits over and over again, and may become reluctant to bite them,” Elias says. “But they haven’t become accustomed to shallow crankbaits — not yet anyway.”

Probe Flowing Channels

“In reservoirs with marked current flow, the river channel and its adjacent structure are the best places to fish on a hot summer day,” says popular TV fisherman Bill Dance. “Flowing water tends to be significantly cooler than static water and more heavily oxygenated from top to bottom. No wonder bass gravitate to current in summer.”

Dance tapes many of his TV shows on Pickwick Lake, a Tennessee River impoundment slicing through parts of Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee.

“Pickwick lies in a popular vacation and retirement area, so it’s often crowded with boat traffic in the summer,” he notes. “But all those cruisers and houseboats running up and down the channel don’t seem to bother the bass. I’ll position my boat on the deep side of the channel drop, then cast a long-billed crankbait or jig onto the adjacent ledge. Bass often stack up on these drops when current is being generated from the upstream dam.”

Fish The Afternoon Shift

As you might expect, lakes located near major cities can be subject to a staggering amount of fishing and pleasure boat traffic in summer. Tennessee bass guide Jim Duckworth frequents Priest Lake near Nashville, which he describes as a total zoo by 9 a.m. practically every day of the week during hot weather. Yet Duckworth and his clients manage to catch quality bass nearly every time out. The guide’s secret is to fish the afternoon shift.

“I find that even on a busy Saturday, the crowds start to thin out by around 4 p.m.,” Duckworth says. “Practically everybody who showed up in the morning is hot and tired by then, and heads for home. Once they leave, I can usually get on my favorite bass spots with little competition. We’ll often fish from 4 p.m. to midnight when it’s less chaotic and a lot cooler.”



Kentucky Lake guide Garry Mason targets isolated pieces of wood around the outer perimeter of fish attractors for big summer bass.

Recognize Boat Traffic Patterns

The next time you get out on a busy lake during summer, spend some time watching where all those boats and jet skis are going. They may seem to be running around randomly at first, but if you pay attention, you'll see that pleasure boaters, unlike bass fishermen, like company. They tend to travel in packs in pretty much the same routes. Fortunately for anglers, this is usually out in the middle of the lake, not in shallow water.

When fishing high-traffic lakes in northern Michigan like Charlevoix and Torch, Mericle catches plenty of bass by sticking to stumpy or weedy areas at least 300 yards from main-lake boat traffic routes.

"I use a long-shaft trolling motor to keep my boat positioned where I want it when those big cruiser wakes roll in," he adds.

Use Boat Traffic To Your Advantage

Perhaps the ultimate tip for coping with summer boat traffic was demonstrated by Kentucky pro Kevin Wirth. On a small lake last summer, Wirth pulled up on an offshore hump,

noted a big school of shad near the structure on his graph, threw out a crankbait and immediately caught a 3-pound largemouth. On his next cast, he caught a 2-pounder, then the spot went dead. Soon several jet skis showed up and ran right over the top of the hump we were fishing. While I began cussing out the wave runners, Wirth remained unfazed.

"Those things don't bother me," Wirth said. "In fact, I've seen many times when they'll trigger a bass bite by scattering baitfish. Any sudden movement of bait, regardless of what causes it, can provoke an immediate feeding response from bass."

Wirth was right. He made a long cast with the crankbait, then tapped the lure over the top of the hump and a 6½-pounder loaded on. I won't be so quick to cuss out a jet skier in the future. 🦈

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