

# How To Penetrate DEEP-WATER BASS Comfort Zone

**S**ometime after the spawn as water temperatures climb higher and higher in the shallows, bass head toward deeper water. In years gone by, this may have been referred to as the summer doldrums — a period when old-timers believed bass simply quit biting because anglers could not catch many fish in the shallows.

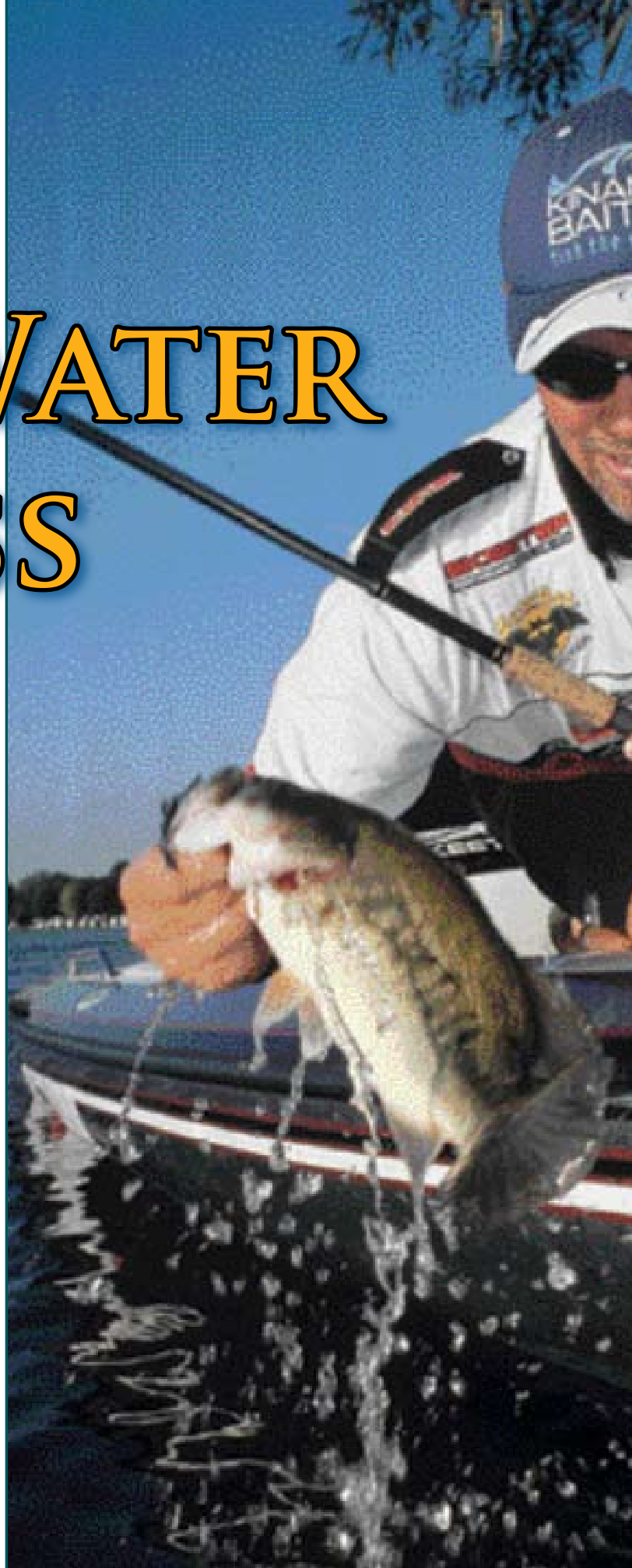
Today, we know different. Those missing bass are on structure, not on banks. What some may still consider the summer doldrums, many of the nation's knowledgeable bass anglers consider the absolute best fishing time. Why? Because if you do your homework, know how to find the right spots and choose your baits correctly, you can catch a bunch of fish on consecutive casts without moving the boat.

“Bass may find a comfort zone in deeper water more to their liking, but the chief reason they are offshore is because that is where the lake's dominant baitfish have gone,” says Kentucky pro angler Mike Auten.

Between fishing the B.A.S.S. tournament trail and filming an angling television show, Auten has the opportunity to sample lakes around the country. “It does not matter whether I'm in the North or South, deep-water summer bass set up on deep breaks, which anglers tend to refer to as ledges,” he says.

## Defining A Ledge

“A ledge is a depth change, a sharp break or step,” explains Auten. “It may be as subtle as a couple of feet or as big a drop as 15 or 20 feet. It all depends on the particular contours of the lake. On many Kentucky and Tennessee reservoirs, deep-water ledge fishing



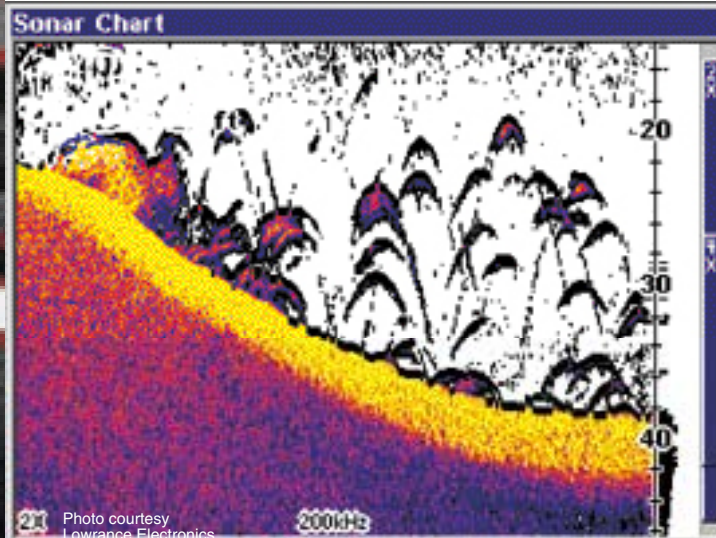


*For probing ledges in water less than 15 feet deep, many professional anglers rely on crankbaits.*

usually takes place in the 5- to 12-foot depth range. On some lakes it might be as deep as 15 or 20 feet, and in other instances even deeper.”

Alabama tournament angler Kyle Mabrey defines a ledge as a sudden change in bottom contour.

“When not on the road, I fish river impoundments on the Coosa and Black Warrior rivers,” he says. “Here, the typical ledge is where the edge of a flat meets the old river channel. When Alabama Power Company pulls water for generation, there is strong current on the main river. Therefore, the best ledges are on outside bends that are directly affected by the current. During summer, I usually look



*Although not every site will appear as rich with fish as this one, a depth-finder is indispensable for pinpointing ledges, whether fish are visible on the screen or not.*

for ledges between 6 and 18 feet around creek mouths and the main river channel.”

Bassmaster Classic qualifier Brian Snowden regards a ledge as a substantial break with a greater than 45-degree angle — not a gradual slope.

“I do most of my summer fishing on Missouri highland lakes in depths between 15 and 45 feet where a typical break is a drop of between 4 and 10 feet,” Snowden says. “On clear-water lakes such as Table Rock, I might fish a ledge that starts at 35 feet and drops into water 60 feet or better. Of course, on those ledges, we focus

on the top, not the bottom.”

Whether he’s fishing in his home state of Pennsylvania or elsewhere, pro angler Dave Lefebvre considers a deep-water ledge a structure with a very visible drop in water deeper than 7 or 8 feet.

“There may be smaller breaks on the flat that hold fish from time to time, but I need to see a minimal 3-foot difference that runs for a substantial distance before I call it a ledge,” Lefebvre says. “Of course, the drop can be greater. I generally target ledges in the 7- to 15-foot range, but will go deeper if needed.”

## Finding The Right Ledge

Both Mike Auten and Dave Lefebvre stress a critical aspect to ledge fishing that many novice anglers overlook in their zeal to hit the jackpot of schooled fish on deep structure — bass may not be home when you visit.

“The best ledge fishermen realize bass schools roam in search of food,” explains Lefebvre. “Maybe you are fishing over one of the best ledges on the lake, but if the fish are elsewhere, you are not going to get a bite. You may fish a spot 10 times a day and only catch fish there once, but it’s the quality and quantity of bass on ledges that make them worthwhile.”

Auten advises a similar policy. “Deep-water structure fishing is about hitting a lot of spots until you find the right one at the right time,” he says. “Bass will move in and out periodically. It’s generally not productive to sit on one spot all day. Most of the time you have got to keep moving and going back to hit previous ledges until you find the bass on one of them.” — *Darl Black*

## Locating A Ledge

Some fishermen wander aimlessly around open water with their depth-finder on in search of a ledge, hoping to stumble into the right spot. However, the pros know a proper search begins long before reaching the water. They follow a similar protocol that includes map study, depthfinder verification and lure exploration to pinpoint each piece of deep-water cover on a ledge.

“For an unfamiliar lake, my first step is to get the best possible map of the lake,” says Auten. “That usually means going beyond the tackle-shop map. If it is a man-made reservoir, you can find detailed topographical maps that were used during the construction of the lake from the TVA, Army Corps or other lake-building authority.”

Tackle-shop maps may be based on the original topo maps, but they omit a lot of valuable information. Go to the original source for maps

whenever possible, which ultimately is the U.S. Geographical Survey.

Auten divides the lake into sections and then picks out five to 15 spots in a general area to check. He looks for sites where drop-offs are indicated on the map, particularly creek-channel junctions, channel turns, unusual features along a creek channel, bluff tailings and other formations that appear to offer a sharp break.

“Don’t waste time on the water studying the map,” says Auten. “Do it at home. When you hit the water, you know exactly where to go. Time on the water should be spent defining the details of the spot.”

Snowden depends on electronics to put him in the right spot right away.

“In the past we had to idle around an area trying to triangulate spots from a paper map,” he says. “When we were a distance from shore, triangulation was impossible. But with the assistance we now get from the new electronic map chips, you can find underwater structure a lot faster. I rely on my Lowrance X15 and Navionics chips that put the topographical contour map right on the screen. Each card has 15 to 25 lakes within a region on it. Now I can pretty much drive right to the spot that I found on a paper map back home or in the hotel room.”

While learning a new area, Snowden employs marker buoys to help him understand the lay of the underwater land. As he becomes familiar with the structure, begins catching fish and can identify the exact spots that produce, he enters waypoints on his bow-mounted GPS. Eventually, he relies only on waypoints and refrains from deploying buoys.

“The key to successfully catching bass off a ledge is being able to find the productive spots on the ledge,” explains Snowden. “The entire ledge does not hold fish. The key could be a high spot, a small point, a couple of stumps, a log, an isolated brushpile, a rock slide, a particularly steeper section of the structure or where current is hitting the ledge. When you isolate one or more of these areas, you do not want to broadcast it to every other angler with a buoy marker.”

Like the other pros, Mabrey initially uses markers to orient his boat position in relation to a productive spot before entering a waypoint. He keeps a small notebook in his boat to log comments about each waypoint. This will tell him exactly how the boat needs to be positioned to effectively work that particular waypoint. He



*By visiting ledges several times during a day on the water, you will increase your chances of encountering bass at the site.*

also notes the water level at the time he entered the information because higher or lower levels can impact boat positioning at a later date.

“Bass can be caught off ledges in any weather during summer, but I prefer sunny days with wind around 5 to 10 mph to find active fish,” says Mabrey. “Sunny days concentrate bass at the key spots, and the wind encourages them to feed.”

## Ledge Lures

The choice of lures for ledge fishing depends in large part on the depth of the water. If the bottom is reachable with a favorite crankbait, that lure is the pick of many pros when searching for the key pieces of cover that hold fish.

“When the ledge is in less than 15 feet of water, I like to throw a crankbait first to test the water,” explains Auten. “A crankbait will provoke strikes from aggressive fish. My favorites are the Lucky Craft D12 and D20. With these two baits, I can fish the 8- to 15-foot zone.”

When he’s confident that he can hit the piece of cover from different angles but is not getting strikes on a crankbait, Auten assumes the fish are not in a crankbait mood.

“That’s when I follow up with a jig, a Carolina rig or a Texas-rigged worm — something that drags bottom and can be worked slowly,” he says. “If there are still no takers, I assume bass are not there and move to the next spot.”

Mabrey follows a similar course of action. “My favorite way to fish ledges

involves a deep-diving Bomber Fat Free Shad and a Texas-rigged Yum Ribbontail Worm,” he says. “Most of the time, I position the boat downstream of the ledge because I believe it is better to retrieve the bait with the current. However, there are times I get upstream of the ledge and cast a crankbait downstream, thereby working against the current. This gets the bait down an extra foot or two. When fishing the crankbait, it is critical to bump the cover to trigger a strike. Casting a crankbait that never deflects off rocks, stumps, etc., will seldom catch a bass.”

When Mabrey goes to the worm, he fishes it from two different boat positions, depending on what he sees on his depthfinder. If fish and bait are suspended off the bottom, he positions the boat on the deep side and casts toward the shallower water. However, if fish are not visible above the structure, which he translates as bass hugging the bottom, he positions the boat on the shallower side and casts into deeper water. A deep-to-shallow retrieve keeps the worm in contact with structure, since it is not swimming down a drop.

Lefebre depends on Luhr Jensen’s Radar 10 and Radar 13 crankbaits to check depths to about 15 feet. But

for deeper water, he relies on heavy-weight jigs and spinnerbaits.

“Nowadays I use a 1-ounce Stanley jig with a slender chunk trailer to check ledges because of the presentation options,” Lefebre says. “I can drag it on the bottom, rip it off the bottom or swim it above the bottom like a crankbait. I’ll back that up with a ¾- to 1½-ounce Stanley spinnerbait.”

Snowden’s home waters often require fishing considerable depths. “In my region, Carolina-rigging the ledges in the 25- to 35-foot range is very productive,” he notes. “Besides detecting wood cover, the ¾-ounce weight interprets the bottom composition, thereby helping to identify transition areas of gravel or rock to softer material. These transitions are often the key spots. As far as a bait on the Carolina rig, I prefer a Yum Notta Worm, Zellamander or Woolly HawgCraw.”

When the situation dictates targeting ledges deeper than 35 feet, Snowden goes to drop-shotting. He fishes vertically with a ½-ounce drop-shot weight, a 1/0 straight-shank worm hook and a 4½-inch Yum Houdini Worm in either watermelon or green pumpkin colors.

“At these depths (35 feet and greater), it is critical to be right on

target,” explains Snowden. “First, I use my depthfinder to locate fish on a ledge. Then I let the drop-shot rig free-fall straight down and keep it within the strike zone by watching everything on the depthfinder. If there is brush on the ledge, I can actually dance the drop-shot worm over the top of the cover.”

### Manufacturers Mentioned

**Bomber**  
(479) 782-8971  
[www.bomberlures.com](http://www.bomberlures.com)

**Lowrance**  
1-800-324-1356  
[www.lowrance.com](http://www.lowrance.com)

**Lucky Craft**  
1-800-270-3117  
[www.luckycraft.com](http://www.luckycraft.com)

**Luhr Jensen**  
1-800-535-1711  
[www.luhrjensen.com](http://www.luhrjensen.com)

**Stanley Jigs**  
(936) 876-5713  
[www.fishstanley.com](http://www.fishstanley.com)

**Yum**  
(479) 782-8971  
[www.yum3x.com](http://www.yum3x.com)