



Story and Photos By Vic Attardo

Once heard an angler say of a moving propeller bait, “It looks like a storm on the water.” Indeed, that description would fit with lure designer Tom Seward’s idea of what a prop bait is meant to imitate.

“It should look and sound like an attacking fish or a school of fleeing shad,” says Seward, of the Yakima Bait Company. “Props create the excitement of something a bass is missing out on, and it makes them want to get in on it. This is what brings bass up to attack prop baits.”

The fact that surface-running, blade-spinning propeller baits arouse fish into a feeding frenzy has been evident since the beginning of modern bass fishing. Some of the oldest lure designs, dating back to the turn of the

20th century, are of glass tubes and wooden lures with propellers attached fore and aft.

Carl F. Luckey’s book *Old Fishing Lures and Tackle* lists companies with such storied names as Heddon, Shakespeare and Pflueger applying for patents in the early 1900s. The irony is that these patents were not for the propellers themselves, which were already on their baits, but for the hook hangers beneath the lures that apparently were harder to develop.

It could be argued that propellers were the most common element on dozens of early baits and that these lures, which also are called sputter plugs, dominated the market for many years.

“The design of these baits hasn’t

Why Blade-

A Feed

changed much in all that time,” Seward says. “They already work, so why transform them?”

Basically, propeller baits fall into two types — those with blades at one end, usually the tail, and those with blades at both ends. The number and position of the propellers change the way the baits walk across the surface. Tail-only prop baits rest at a downward angle with the tail dipping below the surface. When retrieved, tail propeller baits move horizontally across the surface, and even a slight pause causes the tail to sag. This action often results in a forceful thrust of water in front of the lure when the retrieve is resumed, especially if the face is rounded or cupped. They can also be used with an erratic, side-to-side retrieve.

On the other hand, lures with propellers at both ends, like Yakima’s *Ace-In-The-Hole*, lie flat on the surface. The start of the retrieve is accompanied by the spinning of two rotating blades, which results in a spurting or gurgling action. While it’s a matter of degree, dual-bladed baits are sometimes subtler and throw less water than cup-faced, tail-only prop baits, especially when retrieved in a steady fashion along a straight line.

Making A Splash

Over the years, I have seen both professional and amateur anglers who were masters in using propeller baits. These sportsmen had the ability to call up attacking bass as well as those in a more neutral mood.

Unfortunately, there are anglers, both professional and amateur, who can’t make a prop bait work to save their lives. Honestly, it was my own lack of success on one outing, as my partner boated bass after bass, that got me interested in deciphering the puzzle. Texas pro Alton Jones gave me the benefit of his experience and knowledge as we worked a Florida lake. He was catching fish, and I wasn’t.

Spinning Baits Drive Bass Into

Spinning Frenzy

That day the bass were in an aggressive mood chasing freshwater needlefish into a corner cup of a shallow cove. The marauders appeared at intervals, pushing the bait to the surface with an intense frenzy. When the needlefish were on the surface, the bass would take a variety of topwater baits. But this activity didn't last long, and there were substantial gaps between raids.

"We have to make them want to eat," Jones said, as we waited for the next commotion.

Tying on a Smithwick Devil's Horse, a dual-prop wooden bait, Jones flung it as far as he could along a ready shoreline.

"The Horse is shaped like the needlefish the bass are chasing, so it should work," Jones said.

Retrieving the plug, Jones held the rod tip low and moved the bait at a steady pace with short "burps" that threw a little water. The rod tip was not pointed at the bait but quartered at an angle. His elbows were at his side with his wrists doing all the work. Also, I noticed that most of the line was lying flat on the surface. In this way, any commotion in working the line stayed

close to the angler, not the bait.

"They aren't frenzied at the moment, so we want to be a bit subtle," Jones said.

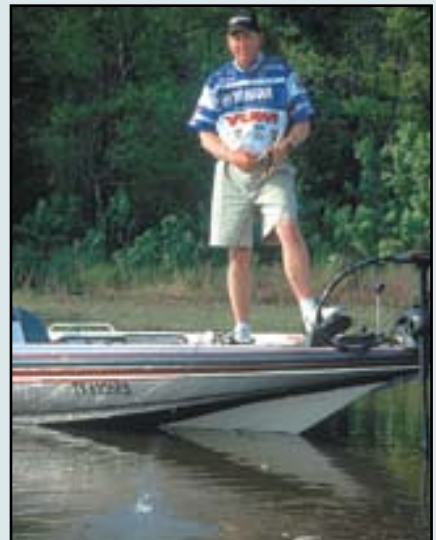
He had moved the lure about 10 yards from shore when a bass tried to catch the tail of the Horse and missed. Immediately, Jones spiced up the action of the bait. He snapped his wrists to produce two quick dips of the rod tip, and the bait threw a shower.

"Come to papa," the normally reserved angler coaxed.

The surface was now broken with what appeared to be two largemouth bass vying for the flying lure. I saw a bulky head on one side of the Horse and a broad tail on the other side. Amid this action, Jones raised the rod with sharp force. He truly crossed the fish's eyes.

After releasing the 4-pounder, Jones explained his actions.

"That's what you sometimes need to do — make it competitive," he said. "Get one bass thinking that another one is getting a free meal. It gets them more aggressive. If they miss the lure, they'll turn and attack



For most propeller bait retrieves, Texas bass pro Alton Jones keeps his rod tip pointed down. The angle is not only important for the bait's action, but also for the hookset.

it again."

Jones selects the style and colors of his prop baits with the typical care he showers on other lures. He favors the Devil's Horse in clear-water situations with visible surface activity. Another of his favorites, the Heddon Torpedo, he uses when the bass require more noise and erratic action. With the rear-bladed Torpedo, Jones can walk the dog, swaying the lure from one side to the other.

As for colors, he most often employs a chrome body with a black back, especially on sunny days. On cloudy days, he uses an opaque white body or frog patterns. For bright, sunny days in dead-calm water, he uses clear lures, such as the Devil's Horse and Torpedo.

"With a clear bait, you can still use a large lure, but it has a smaller visible profile," Jones says. "It's a way of scaling down without really scaling down. I fish the clear bait slowly with soft "pulls" instead of hard, water-tossing jerks."

Big-Bass Propellers

It isn't necessary to convince tournament angler Mark Menendez about the effectiveness of propeller baits. After catching an 8- and 9-pound bass on back-to-back casts with a dual propeller bait on Lake Murray, Menendez was forever hooked.

"I use prop baits primarily at two times in the season — post-spawn and early fall," Menendez says.

For the post-spawn pattern, Menen-



Propeller baits come in all sizes and color schemes. Shown are (left row, from top) Lubr Jensen's Jerk'n Sam, Dalton Special and Nip-I-Diddee; Heddon's Baby Torpedo; (right row, from top) Heddon's Wounded Spook; Cotton Cordell's Boy Howdy and Crazy Shad; and Smithwick's Devil's Horse.

dez looks for fish occupying the outside edges of weedbeds in areas where the fish have nested. During fall, he searches for propeller-interested bass in ultra-shallow water around stumps and laydowns.

“What a lot of anglers don’t realize is that propeller baits can be an all-day deal,” Menendez says. “If there is a slight chop on the water and an overcast sky, they can work magic from dawn to dusk.”

According to Menendez, the key to propeller-bait effectiveness is proper rod handling. When working a propeller bait, he keeps his rod pointed low to the water.

“I get more resistance out of the blades, and when I pop the bait, I don’t pull it a long way across the water,” he says.

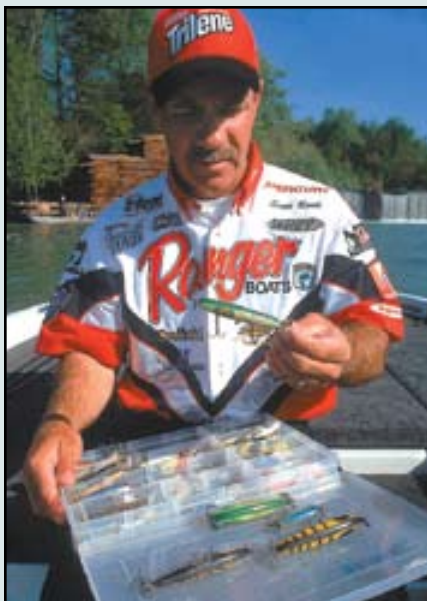
Menendez also believes holding the rod tip low actually aids in the hook-set. “I get a lot of slashing bites with propeller baits, and by keeping the rod down, I’ll be slower in reacting to the strike and won’t pull it away from the fish,” he says.

Menendez sets the hook with what he calls “a nice, soft sweep.” In actuality, his wrists tighten and his hands come close to his chest. At the same time, he pulls the rod low and level, usually turning slightly to his right.

Menendez favors large prop baits, especially in fall. The bait he throws most often, a Gilmore Jumper, produces a “real metallic sound” during the retrieve.

“You want a noisy bait to attract schooling fish to your lure,” he notes.

Of course, big baits require brute



Although the shape is fairly standard, propeller baits do come in different sizes. Three-time Bassmaster Classic qualifier Scott Rook has his favorites, including a well-worn Gilmore Jumper.

force. Menendez uses heavy equipment, including a 7-foot medium-heavy Pflueger Trion and a Pflueger President reel with a 6.3-to-1 ratio. His line, 20-pound test Shakespeare Cajun, isn’t light either.

Three-time Bassmaster Classic qualifier Scott Rook has found an additional time and place for propeller baits. Fishing the underwater jetties of the Arkansas River, Rook works the eddies in front of, or just behind, the river’s submerged rocks.

The commonly found jetties stretch out into the river, forming distinct current breaks. Current washes over the rocks, which creates noticeable eddies. These develop mostly at the tip of the jetty, but also along the front edge and behind the tip.

“Normally, the bass are pretty shallow in this situation because the river is usually stained or muddy,” Rook says.

With the experience of knowing his home waters, Rook casts to the eddies and works the baits according to the bass’s mood. Typically, he finds the fish in front of the bar on the upside of the current.

Rook has one additional trick that early prop bait makers would have liked to have known. He customizes his plugs by adding a split ring to the loops on the hook and bait.

“You actually snag a lot of bass with propeller baits,” Rook says. “They get hooked on the gill plate, on the side of the face and sometimes on the top. With the split rings, the bass doesn’t get quite the leverage to throw the bait.”

Rook chooses No. 2 trebles to replace the hooks on his favorite Gilmore Jumper and Nip-I-Diddee.

He also finds propeller baits effective when another popular surface lure isn’t hooking bass.

“There are times when you’re using a buzzbait that bass just roll on it, but they are not eating it,” Rook says. “Basically, this is happening because the bait is not staying in the strike zone long enough. When this happens, I get out the prop bait.”

Propeller baits have been around a long time, and their popularity seems to be gaining rather than waning. Making a storm on the water is a trick more and more pros and weekend anglers are adding to their bass-catching arsenal. 🎣

Proper Care Of Prop Baits

Just like the Wright brothers trying to find the proper pitch for the propeller of their first plane, early lure manufacturers apparently struggled with the right blade angle for their baits, and they sometimes still do.

Yakima’s Tom Seward says the No. 1 problem in designing a sputter plug is preventing torque. He describes torque “as a rotational force against the shaft or eye of the lure that causes the bait to roll.”

The bass probably wouldn’t mind if a propeller bait rolled on the surface, but the angler would never be able to get the rotating hooks into the fish. Unfortunately, propeller baits fresh out of the box may have a tendency to roll. Seward, who has been designing lures for more than 20 years, recommends a slight bending of the propellers to reduce the torque.

“Usually it doesn’t take much, and by watching the bait, you’ll know if you’ve got it right,” he says.

Another tip Seward offers concerns getting a longer life from a prop bait. Since many of the surface lures are made of wood, he recommends performing some pre-maintenance before ever putting the plug in water.

“You have to seal every possible entrance of the water into the bait,” he says. “Otherwise, when the bait swells and shrivels, it blows the paint off the surface.”

Seward recommends removing all the screw eyes, filling the holes with a 5-minute epoxy and then reattaching the hardware.

“This will keep your bait looking perfect for years,” Seward says.

— Vic Attardo

Manufacturers Mentioned

Gilmore Tackle Co.
(870) 741-2887

www.gilmoretackle.com

Heddon/Smithwick

1-800-531-1201

www.lurenet.com

Luhr Jensen

1-800-535-1711

www.luhrjensen.com

Shakespeare/Pflueger

1-800-347-3759

www.shakespeare-fishing.com

Yakima Bait Company

(509) 854-1311

www.yakimabait.com