

Herring spawn can be a great time to catch bass

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
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Change affects everything and bass fishing is certainly no exception. You can often tell the age of a long-time bass fisherman on one of our South Carolina lakes based on what factors he considers to describe the "good old days."

Some say the good old days were back when willow bushes were found growing in the back of creeks. Others say it was when most of the boats on the lake were rented from local fish camps and a 10 horse outboard was a hot rod.

More recent good old days include those where a half acre of largemouth bass could be found schooling on the surface chasing shad and the fish would stay up for a half hour or more. And any fish that schooled on the surface would be a largemouth bass and not a striper or a white perch or a spotted bass. Finally, the good old days to some meant the lake was covered in fish holding grass, while others reminisce about days when you didn't have to clean that blankety-blank grass off your line every time you made a cast.

Doug Lown of Newberry has seen all of these scenarios come and go on and he just keeps right on fishing. Lown is a former bass fishing guide and has been bass fishing for over 30 years.

Of all the changes that have occurred all across our area lakes, Lown claims one of the most pronounced has been the introduction of blueback herring. Biologists cannot pin down the exact origin of herring in our lakes but suspect they were brought



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Targeting long clay points with herring imitating lures is a great way to catch bass during the annual herring spawn.

in by striped bass anglers to use for bait sometime during the late 70's and early 80's after striped bass stocking began.

At that time, largemouth bass anglers were accustomed to patterning feeding bass by the surface commotion created when bass would trap a school of threadfin shad and tear into them at the surface.

Blueback herring create what is often referred to as a "second story" fishery in the freshwater lakes where they are found. Unlike gizzard and threadfin shad, herring do not tolerate warm water very well and typically inhabit deeper, cooler waters except during the spring when they invade the shallow to spawn. According to Lown, this spawning activity is the key to catching largemouth bass during the month of May.

"Herring typically show up to spawn when the morning water temperatures get to 63 degrees," said Lown. "In a normal year, this is around the third week in April and we will catch bass on this pattern until the water temperature gets into the

80s."

Of great benefit to bass anglers is that as the bass spawn is tapering off, the herring spawn is heating up. In the "good old days" before the herring were introduced to the lake, bass anglers had to tough out several weeks of post spawn recovery before bass returned to a normal pattern.

Now the opposite is correct. Bass come off the beds hungry just as herring are invading the shallows.

"It's probably one of the most consistent patterns of the year," said Lown. "In fact, it's not just the herring that turn bass on. I often catch better quality bass on the bottom using a crawfish bait. I believe the reason is that when the herring come in to lay their eggs, the crawfish come out to eat them and make an additional meal for bass that aren't in a mood to chase down herring."

The best tactics for fishing the herring spawn are typically with either topwater or sub-surface, baitfish imitation lures. Anglers run and gun between long clay points looking for schools of

bass. Don't expect to see extended periods of surface feeding. Pay close attention for one tiny swirl or flash from a herring or feeding bass to locate

schooling bass, which may number from a dozen fish to 40. Once the school is busted, move on to the next point to allow the school to regroup. It's very

possible to be successful on the same point at several different times of day by letting each point rest rather than beating the point to death.

Look for surface baits to work during late April and into the first of May, then through the rest of the month for a few hours in the morning. Sub-surface or bottom bumping lures may produce as the mood of the fish slows or when bigger, lazier fish target crayfish which move about feeding on herring roe.

PHILLIP GENTRY is the host of "Upstate Outdoors," broadcast from noon to 2 p.m. Saturdays on 106.3 WORD FM. This week's guest will be Robert Hall from Lake World on Lake Murray. Contact Gentry at pgentry6@bellsouth.net.