

PRE-SPAWN BASS

A LOOK AT FISHING FOR BASS BEFORE THEY SPAWN AND AREAS WHERE OPEN SEASONS EXIST

BY PETER LARMOND

Once the ice leaves our Canadian lakes there are thousands of avid bass anglers who are forced to either wait until the 4th Saturday in June to chase bass or to settle down and fish for something else until their true piscatorial passions can be fulfilled. But did you know that even in these areas, other nearby jurisdictions can offer an early catch and release bass season that can help fill that empty void?

Pre spawn bass fishing seasons exist in parts of Canada and throughout much of the United States and can offer some of the finest fishing opportunities of the entire year. It's important to note however, that BassMan Magazine does not condone any illegal fishing before bass opener. These seasons were established to protect young bass during the actual spawning process - when male bass are guarding their nests from predators like panfish, gobies, crayfish ... and man.

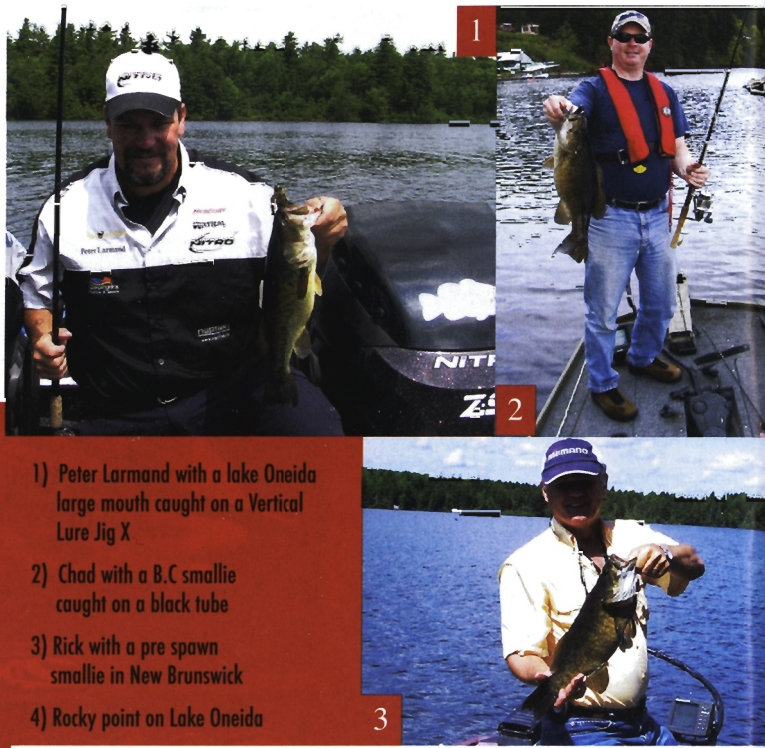
In this article, we are going to focus primarily on the pre-spawn period and look at the migratory routes bass use between their deep water haunts of winter and their preferred mid depth areas utilized just before their move into shallow water to spawn.

WHERE CAN I FISH FOR PRE-SPAWN BASS?

It may come as a surprise to many BassMan readers but in the Canadian provinces where decent bass populations exist there are likely regions that allow one form or another of pre-spawn bass fishing. These provinces include Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Quebec and yes even right here in Ontario in the far north and northwest.

Of course we all know that southern US states for the most part all have a year round open bass season but even many of those that border with Canada offer an early start. Fortunately, catch and release is strictly mandated during early seasons in most regions in Canada and the northern US and there might even be further restrictions (such as no live bait) in some regions. Therefore be extremely diligent in reviewing all fishing regulations that apply to the region you will be visiting.

Southern and central Ontario have perhaps the most restrictive bass seasons in North America with the general opener not falling until the 4th Saturday in June. Even for these die-hard bass anglers though, a relatively short drive south of the border into states like New York or Michigan can be all it takes to enjoy an early start to the bass season.



- 1) Peter Larmand with a lake Oneida largemouth caught on a Vertical Lure Jig X
- 2) Chad with a B.C smallie caught on a black tube
- 3) Rick with a pre spawn smallie in New Brunswick
- 4) Rocky point on Lake Oneida

WHEN DO BASS SPAWN?

Largemouth and smallmouth don't typically spawn at the same time. Water temperature plays a big factor in determining when bass will start moving to their spawning locations. Smallmouth will start spawning in 55 to 58 degree F water, while largemouth prefer 62 to 68 degree F water. These are the prime temperatures for spawning periods and can offer us a basic guide. In order to target pre spawn largemouth or smallmouth bass, we simply plan our fishing excursions when the water temps are cooler. And, when in doubt later in the spring, we stay deeper, where the likelihood of encountering spawning bass is greatly diminished. Successful smallmouth tournament angler Rick Greene tells us

"In New Brunswick we are fortunate to have a bass season that sees our lakes open May 1st. It is great to get an early start after a long winter but the price is learning to fish cold water effectively. Our first tournaments generally see us fishing 40-45 degree water."

MIGRATION PATTERNS

After a long cold winter bass will start following shad, bluegill, perch or other baitfish to the shallows. The migration occurs along defined channels on the lake bottom. However, bass will not make the transition from deep water directly to the shallows without making a few stops along the way. These stops are called "Staging Areas" and can be productive because bass are aggressive and are usually grouped up in large numbers. These locations can include rocky banks/points, laydowns or fallen trees and weed flats. Finding flats with newly emerging aquatic plants is an added bonus so watch your electronics as well. Both

small and largemouth will make this migration during the transition periods of early spring.

ROCKY POINTS

Rocky points are a great place to start looking for smallmouth bass because they are usually the first stop along their route to the spawning grounds. If there is a shallow weedy bay nearby you can even get into a mixed bag with some nice largies thrown in. Check out areas around the 12-14' range and look for large boulders or submerged wood facing the sun that could attract heat.



Throwing deep diving crankbaits like a Lucky Craft Pointer or their Flat CB D-12 and Booyah spinnerbaits can be great for locating active bass. Once you find them you can switch to slower plastic presentations crawled along bottom. I like to use Vertical Lures' Tube X and Creature X or the Yum 6" lizards or their 3.25" crawbug. Don't be afraid to use a flipping jig if there are lots of obstructions. A Vertical lure Jig X in a greenish brown colour is especially productive for largemouth in Oneida Lake where I fish regularly.

No matter what type of lure/bait you are throwing you want to be able to "match the hatch". This is where you try and mimic the size and colour of your lure/bait to the size and colour of the bait fish that the bass are feeding on.

Chad Keogh from Black Creek in British Columbia shares some insight for catching pre-spawn bass in Canada's most westerly province; *"Here in BC, I prefer to cover as much water as possible when initially targeting pre-spawn bass. You usually don't know exactly what depth they'll be holding until you catch a few"*, says Keogh. He advises that anglers do their homework first by reviewing lake maps to try and determine where bass will hold over winter ... typically somewhere deep with shallow water nearby. Then look for and locate the nearest spawning flat and fish between the two spots. *"I start fishing in about 12' of water and slowly work my way shallower as I fish with fast moving lures like Rapala X-Rap deep diving jerkbaits, Rattlin' Rapala's lipless crankbaits, and their DTF-7 medium diving crankbaits."*

Whether it's in Ontario, the United States the East or West coast, strategies are the same. Greene also looks for bass off of a quick break adjacent to the same types of areas as his West Coast counterpart. *"My hands-down favorite approach at this time of year is a jerk bait; especially the Rapala HJ 12 Husky Jerk in silver and black. I find this bait closely resembles the smelt that are found in many of our lakes and this is what the smallies are feeding on*

after a long winter", he says. Greene works along the first break line off of these areas, throwing the bait ahead of the boat and varying the retrieve until he finds one the bass want. *"Most of the time a straight twitch, twitch, and pause cadence works just fine"*, he says. Greene also warns however, that there are times when you need to let the suspending bait sit so long it can drive you crazy and the bass will barely slurp the lure. *"Other days they will attack it like a pack of starving wolves regardless of how quickly you work it, but either way it can be a blast"*, he said.

SUBMERGED TIMBER OR WEED FLATS

If bass are not off breaks or rocky points, don't become discouraged. Start moving shallower. Submerged timber and weed flats are also great locations for moving bass. With the weed growth and other vegetation starting to blossom the bass now have more options for feeding. The key to weed flats is to find ones with new growth close to deep water. Also once bass move into the 4-8 foot range they become more aggressive as they start their final feeding frenzies before moving in further towards an eventual spawning site. Here spinnerbaits, like a 3/8 oz Booyah double willow leaf or shallow running crankbaits like the Lucky Craft RC 1.5 or 2.5 with their tight wobble can be very effective.

Keogh remarked that when he's in less than eight 8 feet of water he'll switch to shallower running baits. *"I'll throw regular X-Raps and Rapala's DTF-4 shallow diving crankbaits until I figure out the depth the majority of bass are holding. Then if action slows down with these lures, I'll go cover the same areas again with slower moving four inch tubes on 1/4 oz jigs."* He also noted that slowly swimming four inch grubs on 1/8 oz darter jigs just off bottom can produce some outstanding pre-spawn bass.

If you are like me and don't live in an area where pre spawn bass fishing is permitted, look to surrounding jurisdictions with early seasons to plan a trip. Always remember to check seasons and fishing restrictions before you hit the water. Catch and release is the best practice during any season but especially during the pre-spawn period with larger bass. Each one represents the future and in the spring they are particularly valuable. Quickly release those precious fish so that you and others can continue to enjoy the same fabulous pre-spawn bass fishing for generations to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Peter Larmand is an avid tournament competitor and guide on Big Rideau Lake. In 2009 he will be fishing the BASS Northern Divisional series as a co angler. Sponsors include: Nitro Boats, Mercury Outboards, Vertical Lures, Save Phace, George's Marine and Sports, NAPFish Internet Solutions and Esterline CMC Electronics.
WEBSITE: www.peterlarmand.com