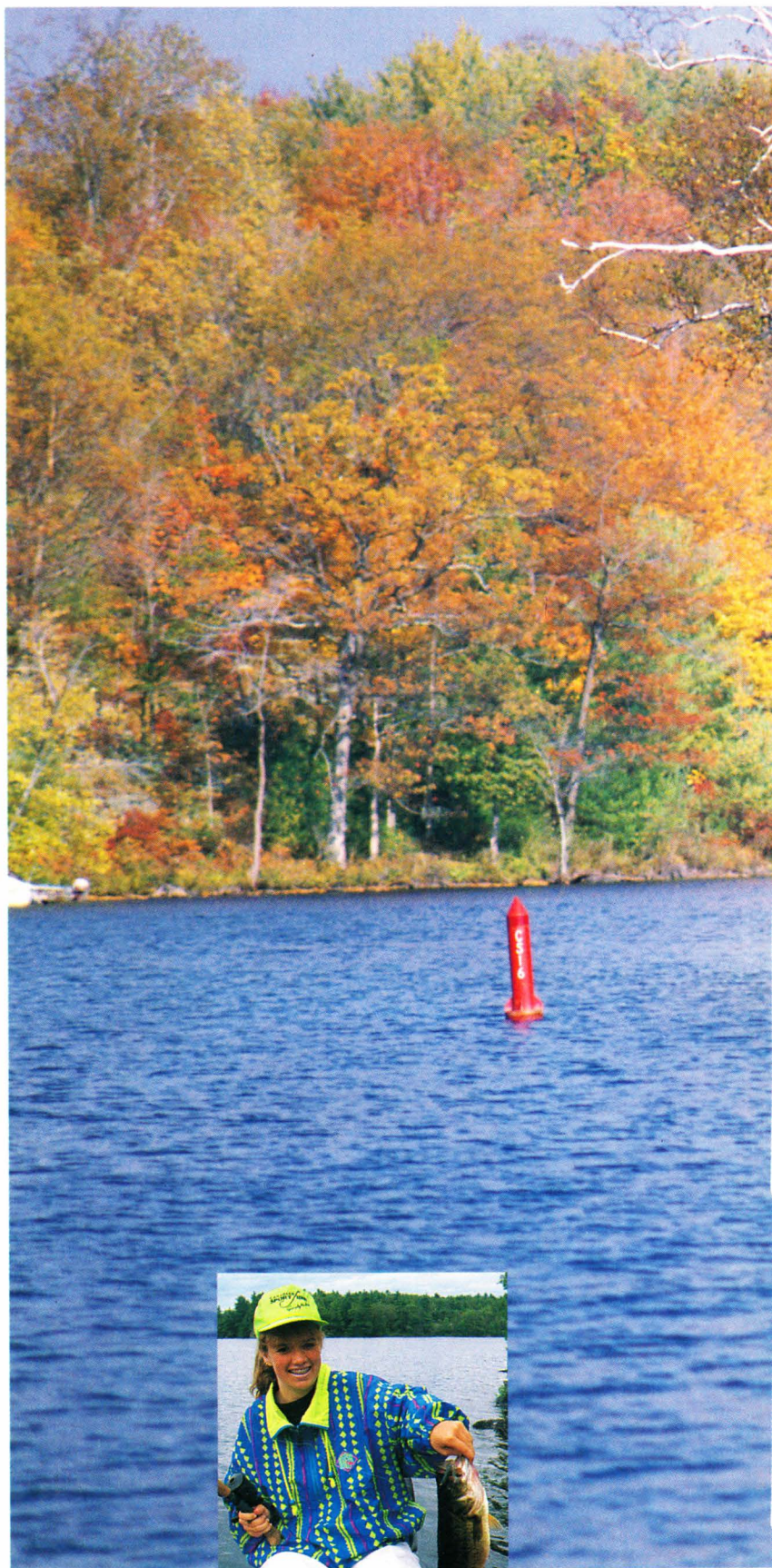


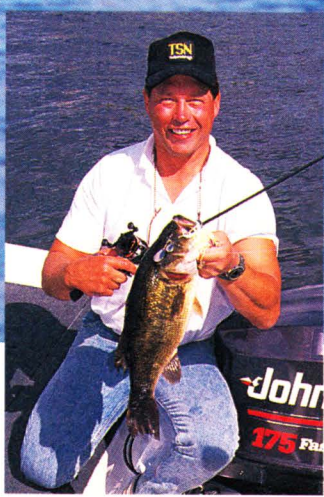
The Right Time

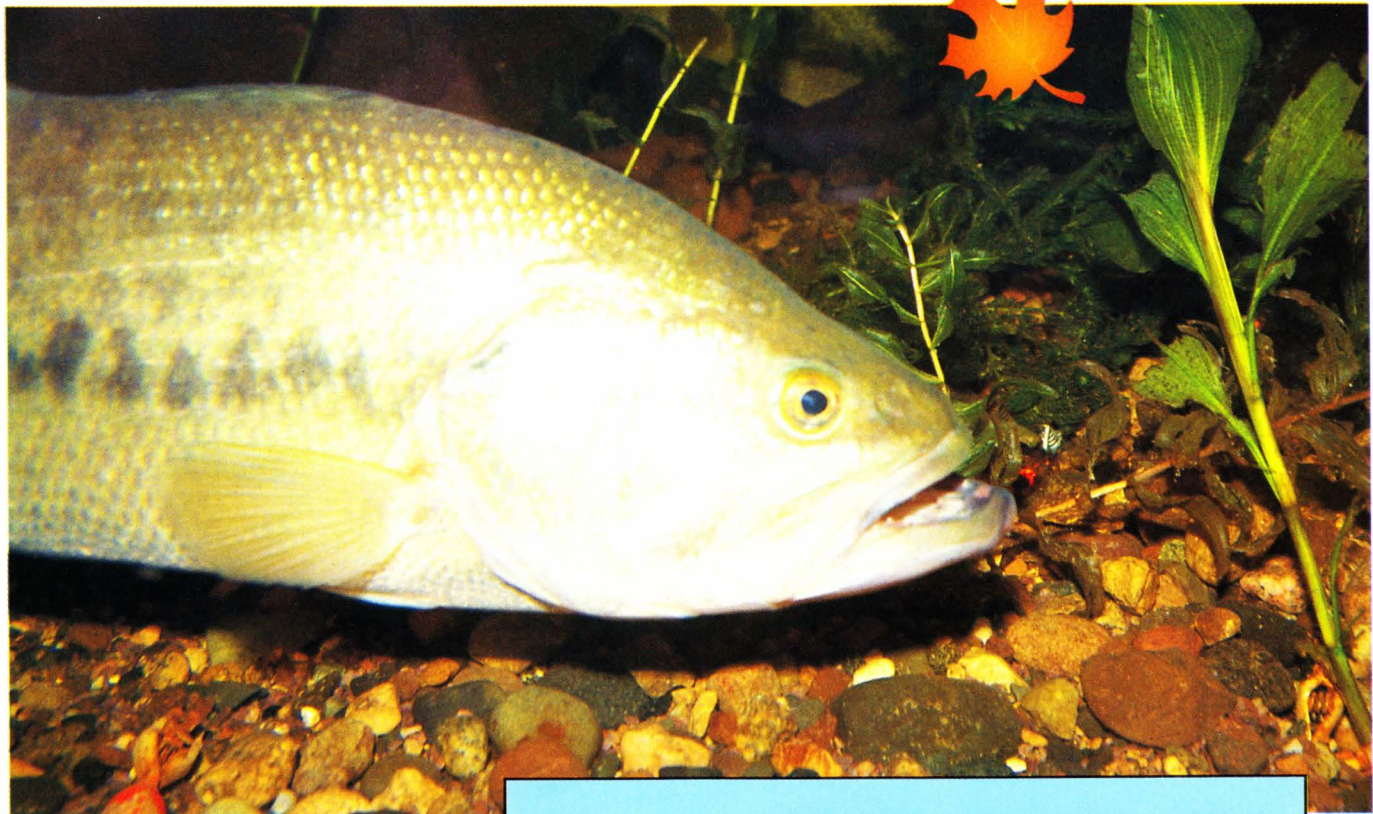


Okay, so maybe fall doesn't exactly spring to mind when you think largemouth bass. But did you know the autumn months bring some of the biggest fish of the year? Catching them is easy — finding them is the key. Happily, that's easier than you might expect, if you know what to look for.

 by John L. Field







Each night in late August the air grows colder, the days grow shorter and the leaves begin to take on their brilliant yellow cloaks. Fall is a time of rapid changes, both above and below the water surface.

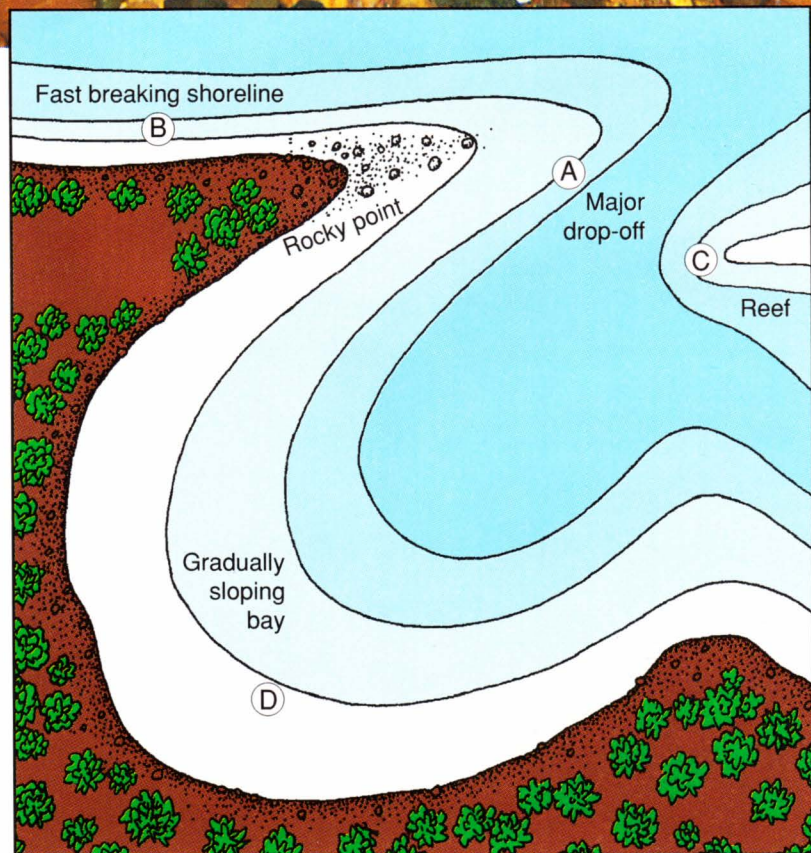
Though largemouth bass are not exactly big fans of variable weather, the approach of fall tends to group large numbers of bass into relatively small areas, making them somewhat vulnerable to a well-placed bait or lure. The actual presentation is easy. It's knowing where to find fall largemouth that makes the difference between a nice boat ride and truly outstanding fishing.

The Fall Transition

Knowing where to look is critical. Rule out the shallows, which bass quickly abandon with the first unsettled weather. Instead, focus your efforts on deeper areas where bass will concentrate on their way to their winter haunts.

Bass movements and water temperatures go hand in hand. As cooler weather drops surface temperatures below nine degrees Celsius, many largemouth will gradually move to secondary lake structures in water as deep as 40 feet or more. The term secondary lake structures is a relative one. Though these reefs, shoals and saddles may be primo chunks of structure, they're not normally used by shallow-dwelling largemouth bass.

The depth range used by largemouth bass



Catching fall bass is a matter of finding them. Look for sharp vertical breaks in water from 15 to 50 feet. Steep drops on (A) rocky points, (B) fast breaking shorelines, or (C) offshore structure like reefs and underwater saddles are best. Shorelines with gradually sloping bottoms (D) are a poor bet. Look for hard bottoms like gravel or sand covered with live vegetation or wood (photo above).

The Ultimate Fall Largemouth Rig



It sure doesn't look like much — a little piece of plastic just under four inches long. But don't let its appearance fool you. Let it fool the fish instead. These little worms, called Jersey rigs, are big time bass catchers. It's easy to wonder how, since they don't have much action. But it's exactly that non-action that attracts the fish.

These small worms have a more or less neutral buoyancy in the water, but when impaled on a no. 1 bait hook rigged straight through the middle of the worm, with no sinker, they fall ever so slowly. This technique allows the worm to float through the strike zone for a very long time, appealing to fish more effectively than a faster-moving lure that just buzzes by.

The presentation is simple — just lob it out over good structure and let it sink on its own weight. Sure, it may take a while to get down there. But it's worth the wait.

Once you hit bottom, reel it along slowly, twitching it gently as you go. That twitching action bends the soft worm into a U shape, making it look somewhat like a caterpillar or grub wriggling away. Just make sure you give it ample time to sink back to bottom again.

You don't need any special equipment to fish Jersey rigs. Standard spinning tackle and eight pound test is all you need. The key is to hook the worm straight through the center of the body.

You can use a chunk torn from a standard plastic worm for Jersey rigs, or buy the real McCoy from a company called Jersey Riggs, Box 9141, Lyndhurst, NJ 07071. A pack of 20 worms costs about \$5 US.

—Jill Barnes



in fall is highly variable, from roughly 15 to 50 feet. Within that range largemouth will relate to a variety of hard structures such as humps, rock piles, drop-offs, old river beds and points. Many times these fall locations are along underwater gorges that provide access to deeper winter home range areas. The most consistent spots tend to be close to steep drops or banks.

When I say relate to structure, I mean literally lying on it, suspending just above it or even hanging off it, on the deep side but at the same depth. Though bass seem to spend more time in actual contact with the bottom in the winter than in fall, they rarely venture very far from it. The lone exception comes after the fall turnover, when bass range more freely and can be found at many depths.

In lakes subject to summer stratification, where solid thermoclines may develop, you'll almost always find largemouth holding on the shallow side of the thermocline in places where the thermocline contacts bottom structures.

Fishing Strategies

Fall bass fishing isn't like it is in summer, in that you don't cast from your boat towards shoreline cover, but rather go about it the other way around. You usually cast away from shore. Bass are not where you found them in July, and you will catch little or nothing by pounding dead lily pad beds.

In the fall bass concentrate in large schools. Understanding that they will sit on deep, vertical structures is the first step. Use a navigation chart to spot potential locations, then check them out. A fish finder is obviously an enormous aid in locating specific chunks of structure.

Remember that at least 90 percent of the water does not contain what you're looking for. It is best to navigate your boat parallel to depth breaks at a constant depth to gain the most accurate picture of the bottom's contour. That means you follow the contour lines. For example, you might start fishing a drop at 20 feet. Work your way along the structure, but keep on that 20 foot level. Then make another pass at 30 feet, then 40. Start at shoreline points and make a sonar

search by following along the point into deeper water, before turning and following the other side of the point back towards shore. Also try searching on steep breaks, submerged humps and rockpiles until you see some signs of life. It shouldn't take long.

It can be very difficult to pick up fish sitting tightly amongst boulders or sunken trees, or those stuck right on bottom. Therefore, always give good looking structure a try, even if you don't mark any fish. Amazingly, you can sometimes catch bass on barren-looking spots. Even the best fish finder can have difficulty picking a two pound bass out of a field of rocks.

Try to find a big concentration of fish (the bass mother lode, as I like to call it) and stick to it. You can mark the school location by dropping a marker buoy. These fish are highly competitive predators, so it's often possible to catch a bunch from the same area.

Presentation

Fall largemouth can sit in very tight spots, so boat control is critical. The key to maintaining absolute control over your presentation is to fish from a double-anchored boat. That is, one anchored from both bow and stern. Drop anchor upwind and away from the school, then tie off and set up next to your marker. Once you're in place over a promising group of fish, look into your tackle selection and decide what to use. If the bottom has few snags, casting a lure and bouncing or crawling it back along bottom is an excellent presentation. Doing this "uphill", or casting to deep water and retrieving toward the shallows so the lure seems to climb up the structure, gives you better lure contact than if



Gareth Davies with a 21" October largemouth.

'Eye Catchers

Scarlet Eye

Attractor

Beaded Back

Red Flash

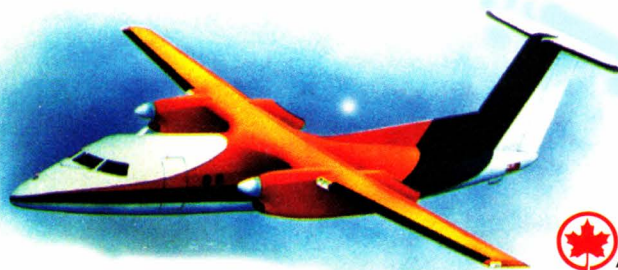
LUCKY STRIKE

REGISTERED TRADEMARK
IN CANADA AND
UNITED STATES

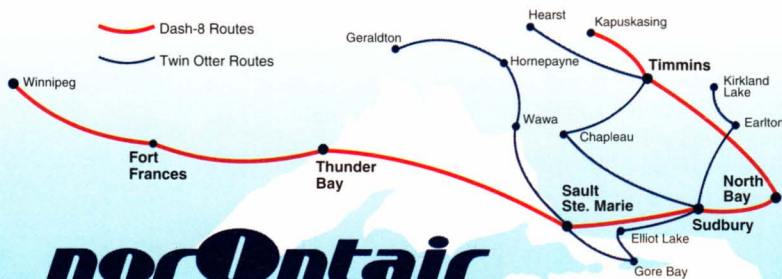
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it were tumbling the other way. But if snags make this impossible even with weedless lures, a vertical presentation is the best approach. There can be a difference in the success between these two methods when fish are triggered more by a lure moving away horizontally as opposed to being jerked straight up. You may also have more success casting because fish further away from the boat are often less spooky than those directly underneath the hull.

Even the deepest-diving crankbaits realistically only reach depths of about 15 feet, and even then usually on just the last few feet of a retrieve. For the majority of them, the average depth during the retrieve is more like eight to 10 feet. This isn't going to cut it if the fish are deeper, and they usually will be. Lures that incorporate lead jig heads or metal bodies are usually better suited for working deep structure, particularly in rivers where you will have to increase the weight of your selection to attain the same depth in the current.

Lead jigs dressed with plastic, pork or buck-tail are ideal for this fishing because they sink fast. The most popular colours for bass jigs, trailers and worms are blue and black, motor oil, purple, black, and pumpkinseed, which effectively imitate either minnows or crayfish. Jigs in the 1/4 ounce to 3/8 ounce range rigged with tube bodies, twister tails or crayfish imitations are effective, as are Carolina rigged plastic worms and light flipping jigs. In very deep water, remember that banana or stand-up heads with bucktail dressings will normally sink faster than a jig with a plastic skirt.

Other good bets include spoons like the Hopkins Shorty, Luhr Jensen Krocodile or Williams Whitefish, particularly in chrome or gold finishes. Blade baits like the Heddon Sonar or Cordell Gay Blade sink fast and swim like a crankbait when retrieved up-wards or horizontally. And for pure vertical presentations, it's tough to beat a jigging Rapala, which you've probably got in your ice fishing box.

The mechanics are straightforward — put the lure on the bottom and keep it there. If you're not periodically bumping bottom, you're not deep enough.

Remember that in the autumn's cooler water, you'll have to slow down. Fish are cold blooded creatures, so their energy levels are dictated by water temperature. In cool water, you'll have to slow down to elicit hits. But when they come, look out. You're in for some of the easiest pickin's of the year!

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