

Fall Bass on Lake Keowee

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The surface temperature of Lake Keowee is about start to dropping down from its late summer highs. As the shallow water cools down and holds more oxygen, the larger bass will spend more time in the shallows feeding up for the winter. And we will again be able to catch them there.

I live in the vicinity of Mile Creek Park and have recorded surface water temperature measurements at my dock for the last 11 years. The annual temperature cycle is well defined. The summer water temperature at my dock usually peaks in mid August around 88°F to 90°F. This year the highest I've seen so far is 87°F. High-temperature water holds very little oxygen and drives the bass deep into the cooler, more oxygen-rich water where they are harder to find and catch. This is especially true for the larger, more mature bass which appear to be more sensitive to light levels and oxygen content. However, bass still have to eat, so they tend to make forays into the shallows when the water there is the coolest, just before the sun rises. This is why in many parts of Lake Keowee the big bass have been harder to catch for the last 6 weeks, except at the crack of dawn in those shallows that are only a short run from deep water.

During the height of summer heat, the fish are most active in Lake Keowee just below the Jocassee Dam where the water coming in from Lake Jocassee generally keeps the water temperature there around the high 70's. And even just north of the Route 11 bridge, the water temperature has held around 5 degrees colder than around Mile Creek Park.

In summer, many anglers fish the cooler water near the Jocassee Dam. The bass are often quite active chasing baitfish on most mornings when cooler water is running down through the generators from Jocassee causing considerable current in the tailrace where the dam is visible from the water, and even further down in the lake. Those anglers usually find that these active bass know exactly what they want and are very hard to catch except with a bait very close in size, shape, and color to the extremely plentiful baitfish that they are chasing. The problem at the dam is that there are so many baitfish! So if you toss out a lure that is exactly like the baitfish they are chasing, then your lure is 1-in-a-million, and the odds are very small that the bass will pick yours. So anglers need a bait that is almost like the baitfish, but different enough to get the attention of a feeding bass. Because I can cast it a long distance to reach these feeding bass, my lure of choice for these bass is a ¼ oz. or ½ oz. chrome Kastmaster jig on which I've upgraded the hooks to the next larger size.

Today, the morning surface water temperature near Mile Creek Park was 86°F. A little north of the route 11 bridge it was 5°F less, and in the south end of the lake it was 3°F less. According to my charts covering the last 10 years, the water temperature starts dropping linearly around the first week of September. By the first of October it's 82°F +- 2°F. By the first of November it reaches 73°F +- 3°F. And by Christmas it starts to level off around 60°F. Then it drops slowly to a low in January and February of about 56°F. Near the "hot hole" where the power plant cooling water comes into the lake from Duke Energy just north of the 130/183 bridge, the water remains 5-10°F warmer through the winter generating a lot of local, early morning fog and in winter making the fish there

more active than in other parts of the lake. And south of the 130/183 bridge the water temperature in the south end of the lake will gradually become about 5°F colder than at Mile Creek Park and remain that way for most of the winter as the general lake temperature falls.

So, what does all this mean for fishing now?

September is a month of transition from the summer pattern described above to the fall pattern. As the lake water temperature drops into 70s during the fall, the cooler temperature allows the shallow water to hold more oxygen and the bigger bass tend to spend more time in the shallows looking for food. Early mornings, and further into the Fall late evenings, are the lowest light times and the best fishing times in which to work the shallow points with surface lures and shallow-running soft baits and crank baits. At the crack of dawn and last evening light, fish feed in 2 to 10 feet of water. Later in the mornings and earlier in the evenings fishing is more productive in the approaches to those shallows in 10 to 20 feet of water with deeper running lures like X-raps, Rattletraps, diving crank baits, weighted flukes, and Carolina-rigged worms.

Also, as the lake water cools, the bass tend to move further up into the creeks and bays looking for migrating baitfish on which to fatten up for the winter. Deeper into the fall, look for multiple fish jumps with minnows jumping clear of the water to escape surface-thrashing bass chasing schooling minnows, especially in October and November. The spotted bass in particular will be chasing schools of baitfish, especially in the areas where bays narrow. Casting a minnow-shaped lure, a top-water lure, or a Kastmaster jig into that surface action can be quite productive. Of course, you have to find a way to sneak close enough to reach the action with a long cast!

If you only see a single jump here and there, and no minnows jumping clear of the water, don't get too excited. Those jumps are probably carp.

As the water gets even colder (60s and high 50s) further into the winter, the evenings after a warming sunny day should be better than the cold early mornings, not only for shallow-water fish activity but also for angler comfort! During a winter day, you're best bet for winter fishing is going to the bottom with a drop-shot plastic minnow in 70-80 feet of water where creek channels open to the main lake. But winter is still a long way off, much as some of us are ready to beat the heat now!

For now, if you've been discouraged by the poor fishing in August and early September, it's time to try again in the main lake shallows around the crack of dawn!