

Where Do Lake Keowee Bass Go in Summer?

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The surface water temperature has now risen above 80°F in most places on Lake Keowee, and by the time you read this, in July/August, the temperature will have reached the upper 80s to low 90s for the summer. Summer is the time many people visit Lake Keowee and, while they are here, try to catch fish. Unfortunately, summer is also the most challenging time to catch bass on Lake Keowee. My father used to tell me, “You have a better chance of catching fish if you fish where the fish are!” So, where are the Bass?

Most people have noticed that the larger bass in particular don't really like warm water. But why is that? After all, fish are cold blooded so their body temperature adjusts to the temperature of the water around them. So I would expect that if the water temperature outside their bodies is the same as the temperature inside their bodies, then they really can't notice whether they're in hot water or cold water based on temperature.

The answer is oxygen. The 80+°F surface water holds very little dissolved oxygen. By mid summer this low-oxygen, surface layer can go down as far as 15-20 feet. The bass, especially the bigger ones that are more sensitive to low oxygen levels, spend very little time in this surface water. They prefer to spend more time below the thermocline in the deeper, cooler water that holds more dissolved oxygen. They do make forays into the shallows for food since the smaller food fish are less sensitive to oxygen and remain in the shallows. Bass make most of these food forays in the very early morning when the water is the coolest during the 24-hour cycle. They stay in the shallows only for a very short time before going back down into the cooler water. So if you want to find them in the shallows, you need to look in shallows near drop-offs to deeper water where bass can quickly move shallow, eat, and move deep again.

Here are several approaches you can try to find bass with some chance of success.

- You can fish main lake shallow points near deep water starting at the crack of dawn with surface lures and shallow-running crank baits. The crack of dawn is when it's still dark, but if you look to the east you can see the first hint of morning light. In early July with a clear sky on Lake Keowee that's about 5:15AM and gets later as the summer progresses. You're not likely to catch bass this way after the sun hits the water for the day.
- During the day, you can drag Carolina-rigged, plastic worms, live worms, and minnows along 20-40 foot depth contours near shallow points and islands to try for the bass that are holding there between runs into the shallows for food. If the sun is high and the water surface is calm, bass are likely to be at the deeper end of that range.
- You can troll deep looking for bass suspended below the warm surface water. To try this, if you don't have downriggers, use about 2½ ounces of weight ahead of 3-6 feet of leader attached to a deep-diving crankbait. If you let out about 100 feet of line and troll very slowly with your main engine, you can figure your lure will be down about 35 feet or so. (After you lose a few lures passing over areas that are too shallow you'll get a better handle on how deep your lures really are for your rig and your trolling speed. Don't take it personally, losing lures that way happens to all of us

while we are calibrating our rigs!) People have been successful doing this trolling along the sides of deep channels and points in 50 to 90 feet of water. I'm personally not a troller, but I've heard from those who are that a good time of day to try this is 10AM to 2PM with a slight breeze and some clouds in the sky.

- During days with a strong wind, you can look for areas where the wave action puts more oxygen into the water. In these conditions there are two likely bass hangouts. First, try fishing a windward shore where the waves are crashing into riprap. It may be hard to control your boat in the wind, but the waves breaking on the shore not only put more oxygen into the water, the waves also dislodge baitfish from their rock hiding places and force them out into open water where the bass have learned to wait for them! Second, try fishing a shallow bar (2-10 feet deep) near deep water where the wind is blowing waves over the bar generating a little current across the bar. On the down-wind edge of the bar the wind current forms a vertical eddy that sucks some of the cooler water up along the bottom toward the bar in a kind of undertow and makes it more comfortable for bass to lurk there in the cooler water hunting for small fish that the current sweeps past the edge of the bar.
- You can go to tail race of the Jocassee Dam where water enters Lake Keowee in the summer at about 70°F when the dam is generating power. There is more oxygen in the water there, and schools of baitfish and bass are often active for a few hours when the dam starts generating each day. The trick here is to use a lure that closely resembles the baitfish, because the bass there know exactly what their target meal looks like. However, don't pick a lure that is exactly like the baitfish, or your lure will be just one-in-a-trillion among the baitfish, and then what are the odds a bass will pick yours to gobble? So in that environment you want your lure to be similar enough to the baitfish so the bass will accept it, but slightly different to stand out just enough so the bass will notice and go for your lure instead of the trillions of baitfish.

Whatever you try, good luck! Summer is still the hardest time to catch bass on Lake Keowee. So go prepared to at least enjoy the experience. My father also used to tell me, "He who goes fishing and complains that he didn't catch fish forgot why he went."