

Winter Bass Fishing on Lake Keowee by Bill Walker

Now that the surface water temperature has fallen below 70°F in most places on Lake Keowee, it's likely to continue dropping quickly to its winter levels: 50°F - 60°F depending on where you are on the lake (not counting the "hot hole" where the water is generally a bit warmer). Since bass are cold blooded, their body processes slow down as the water temperature drops. As that happens, look for bass to become more lethargic, which means that the early fall feeding frenzies will be harder to find. Bass will be spending more of their time resting on the bottom at depths of 20-40 feet, or suspending near vertical or steeply sloping structures.

For the other three seasons of the year, the crack of dawn, when the hint of daylight first appears in the eastern sky, is when the bass are active on most shallow main lake points and accessible to anglers who are up early enough to cast surface lures, crank baits and shallow soft baits in their direction. But in the winter, the crack of dawn is often the coldest part of a cold day, and the fish are often less active. Their activity picks up later in the day when the sun has had a chance to warm the water a bit.

My outdoor activity picks up then, too! I also like being warmer! I, for one, prefer to fish during the warmer part of a winter day. The wind chill of a moving boat can really drain my body heat, even when I wear lots of layers. My limit is an air temperature of 32°F, and if there is wind blowing, even 10 degrees warmer may be too cold for me! One thing is for sure, if I have to dip my fishing rod into the water to melt the ice out of the line guides, then it's too cold for me to enjoy being out there fishing, no matter how optimistic I may be about catching something. The winter morning air is often colder than that!

Another drawback to winter mornings is fog! Cold morning air often creates dense fog over Lake Keowee, which can be disorienting even to boaters who know the lake the best. Be very cautious about venturing into the dense fog. A person can easily lose his way and run up on a shoal, or hit another boat that is invisible until too late. At best you could waste a lot of time trying to get to a fishing spot. If you must fish on foggy mornings, try fishing where you are until the fog clears, and then move to your preferred spots.

For all the reasons above, I generally do not fish winter mornings. What do I do?, you ask.

One approach is to wait until late morning or early afternoon on a sunny day and fish the steep sunny shores near some riprap or other cover where the small fish will be hiding ... areas where there is a short swim from the depths to some food. The sun will warm things there a bit, encouraging any bass there to be a little more active. But remember, the bass don't have eyelids to protect their eyes from the bright sunlight, and the colder winter water is clearer than the warmer summer water, so they tend to hang out deeper in the sunny areas, especially if the water surface is still and the sunlight can really penetrate. Another way for the more active bass to get protection from the sun is to hang out in the edge of a shadow close to where the sun warmed water is drifting into the shadows.

Another approach is fishing late afternoon/ evening. In the winter months, I personally prefer fishing in the evening "magic hour," the last hour of light. (In winter this means negotiating for a family dinnertime that is late enough after dark for me to get home, say 7pm.) Not only is "magic hour" the most beautiful time of day, but also the sun has had the whole day to warm things up as much as possible, and I imagine that makes the lake critters a little more active and interested in biting. Even though the air temperature can drop quickly as the sun is going down, the water temperature changes more slowly. In the last daylight hour as evening comes and the

light level fades, the bass may migrate slowly from the deeper water into the shallows that have been warmed recently by the sun but now have the dimmer light. So I like to position myself on those migration paths and fish along the bottom with a Carolina-rigged worm. Others may prefer a drop-shot rig or jig, but for some unfathomable reason, I personally don't have luck with those.

I recommend that you fish with what you feel most comfortable using, and fish with it more slowly in the winter months than you would the rest of the year. Give a cold, lethargic bass a chance to get interested as your lure goes by. And by all means, pick a time when you'll really enjoy being out there ... if you aren't having fun, what's the point?