

Winter Fishing on Millwood Lake

Fishing the Arkansas Jungle with Mike Siefert.

Often the casual angler avoids winter bass fishing one of two reasons. First, many think of fishing as a summer activity and do not give it much thought as the fall season converges on their favorite waters. Second, they feel that the cold temperatures cause bass to stop feeding and cannot be caught. Both of these fallacies cause anglers to miss a great opportunity during the colder season.

In Southwest Arkansas, Professional Fishing Guide Mike Siefert, reports bass can be caught on his home waters of Millwood Lake during any season. Mike said, "We fish Millwood year round, but summer and winter bass fishing on Millwood Lake require a very similar approach. The main difference is how the bass feed based on the expected changes in the bass' environment." As winter approaches bass will begin feeding heavily on shad in preparation for the colder season. This occurs because bass know the shad will begin to die-off and the food source will diminish. Many anglers feel the colder temperatures trigger this fall feeding frenzy but Mike has a different view.

Mike says bass learn from cause and effect conditioning and what humans detect as colder water temperatures do not affect the bass as much as many anglers believe. Anglers generally monitor surface temperatures on the water but the surface temperatures change rapidly due to weather conditions. Mike said, "The reduced surface temps may trigger the shad die-off, but I feel the bass are in a different mode altogether. Ten feet below the surface water temperatures change much more slowly. I think the fall feeding period is triggered by the reduction in sunlight due to shorter daylight hours in the fall with the approach of winter. Much like a deer's rut is triggered by reduction of photoperiod or reduced light entering the brain triggers key hormones. In fact, between 10-15 feet of depth, the water temperatures remain fairly constant year round on this lake, normally between 60°-70°F all year. I have only seen the northern lake's shore freeze once, in over 40 years of fishing Millwood, and that was extremely rare, about 10 years ago."

As I questioned Mike about winter season bass fishing he offered some sound advice for Millwood Lake that is essential to all bodies of water. He feels winter techniques should be used when the surface temperatures reach middle to low 40-degree range. Because Millwood Lake is a relatively shallow body of water the only real deep water is located in the submerged river channels. Mike looks for areas where channels make a turn near a point and concentrates on the outside bend. These areas will offer the bass a refuge from the quickly changing temperatures near the surface and allows them to move vertically to find a comfort zone.

Mike said, "Bass positioned deep in the water column stay put on a more consistent basis making them easier to locate. I have seen many warm, sunny days where the water temperature goes from 40 to 48 degrees and the bass will move up shallow but they are scattered, spook easily and more difficult to catch than the bass positioned deeper." He reported he fishes up to 45 feet deep in the winter to catch bass located on the vertical

edges of the river channels. Also, the deeper, suspended bass are not near as susceptible, nor affected by, widely fluctuating temperatures as the air changes temps, like what affect the shallow water areas much more rapidly.

For anglers not having the opportunity to spend the amount of time on the water he does, Mike offered the following advice. “Locate points and cut-banks and present a ¾ to one ounce (red beginning around early February) Rat-L-Trap with a slow retrieve. I basically choose colors based on water clarity, and primary forage base at the current time.” His favorite models for cold weather deep structure fishing are the Pro-Trap and Spin-Trap. The Spin-Trap has a willow leaf blade in place of the rear hook. The Pro-Trap also has the willow leaf blade and also features a hole through the lure allowing for the hook to be tied directly to the line. This added feature allows the lure body to slide away from the hook and fish, preventing the likeliness of a fish throwing the hook during battle. Both lures now have the new Set-Lok® hooks. Mike emphasized, “No longer does a fisherman have to change out the factory hooks! Rat-L-Trap listened to their customers and Pro-Staff members, and improved the hook beginning late last year. Now all Traps have the new Set-Lok® hooks that are extremely sharp.”

This technique allows him to determine how the bass are locating to cover. Mike said, “When the gates on the dam are open bass will generally position on the down current side of cover to conserve energy and wait for the food to come to them. When there is not any current being generated they tend to scatter throughout the cover waiting in ambush for baitfish.” If the bass are holding tight to cover and require a vertical approach Mike will present the Rat-L-Traps like many anglers present a jiggging spoon. He says many anglers miss a great opportunity the Rat-L-Trap offers if they fail to make a vertical presentation with this lure. Once the bass are located Mike said he would go to a slow moving lure only if necessary. He said, “Jigs and worms are great winter season lures, but they do not allow anglers to cover as much water as faster moving lures like crankbaits and spinnerbaits. Once I locate fish and determine their “mood” then I normally will switch over to a jig, tube, creature lure (or worm) because crawfish are their main staple of diet after the shad die-off and shad aren’t as plentiful during colder weather and their focus shifts to the crawfish.”

Millwood Lake is considered clear when visibility is 2 – 3 feet and when water is stained to muddy Mike opts for slow moving spinnerbaits. His spinnerbait of choice is a War Eagle bait with large Colorado blades. He prefers the Colorado blades because the fish can detect the “thumping vibration made by the blades and locate the lure easier in muddy, stained, or off-clarity conditions.” He recommends using bright colors like chartreuse and white for the dirty water conditions.

For rod and line choices he offered the following advice. “Millwood Lake is considered clear when the visibility is 2-3 feet. We don’t have much need for fluorocarbon line and I always use the heaviest line I can get away with without effecting the lure presentation. My choice of line is Excalibur Silver Thread in 17-25 pound test matched with a Lamiglas rod. Millwood Lake is filled with timber, vegetation, and stocked with almost 2 million huge Florida Bass, so opting for light line will create a broken-hearted angler

when a Millwood giant breaks off. Mike said, “Medium Heavy, to Heavy rods and tackle only, apply here; and guys bringing reels spooled with less than 15lb test have had lots of hearts broken over the years with the one that got away. We have literally lost count of the bass between 8-12 pounds in the last 6-8 years here and it really is like fishing a jungle.”

As expected Mike spend most of his fishing time on Millwood Lake. However, the advice he offered can be applied on similar bodies of water. With over 20 years of guiding anglers on his home waters, over 40 years experience on Millwood, and 5 guides, he has a vast amount of bass fishing knowledge. Mike’s Pro-Staff Sponsors include Rat-L-Trap, War Eagle Lures, SilverThread, Heddon, Bomber, Bass Assassin, Lamiglas, Dual Pro Chargers, Pro-Tec, and others. To contact Mike Siefert visit his website at <http://MillwoodGuideService.com>