

## Winter Time Fishing

It was finger numbing cold yesterday, sunny and short-sleeves today, and the weatherman is calling for sleet to tomorrow. So were do you even start in trying to put together a limit? Basic seasonal patterns tell you to go deep for winter bass and to target the main channel. The same basic seasonal pattern also names the jig n' pig, suspending jerkbait, big spinnerbaits, and the jigging spoon as your tools of choice. And the key word is SLOOOOW. There's just one problem, how often does following the basic seasonal winter pattern actually put any fish in the boat?

The purpose of seasonal patterns is to give you a place to start on the water, and this is especially important for winter. Few of us spend much time on the water in the late fall and early winter. There are also a lot of changes from the time of our last fishing trip to the next one, usually after the holidays. Water temps have really dropped and on some lakes the winter draw down has occurred. So we're starting from scratch.

The standard winter pattern of slow and deep generally isn't very effective because it doesn't take into account the many conditions faced from year to year and region to region. A winter pattern for Kentucky in January is different than a winter pattern for Alabama in January of the same year. That same Kentucky January pattern may work come February in Alabama or it may not. It might not even work in Kentucky in January of the next year? Everything depends on the weather for that year and that day, especially in the south where winters are milder.

Because of the variations in temps one single basic pattern will never be very productive. However we still need a place to start, and the place to start in winter is with understanding water temperature and shad.

Have you ever watched a pond freeze over? The shallow end always freezes first, and the deepest area is the last to freeze over. A large volume of water takes longer to cool, and it also takes longer to warm. Now think of a lake as one giant pond. What area will cool the quickest?

Shad migrate to the creeks and tributaries in the fall. Actually shad migrate to many shallow areas they are just more abundant in the creeks and tributaries. These creeks and tributaries are the shallow end of the pond. When cold weather arrives these are the first places to cool off. That's a problem for shad so they leave these shallows in search of more stable water. This fits perfectly with the classic deep water main lake seasonal pattern except shad are almost always moving and temps change, even during the course of a day.

Shad are often found at or near the mouth of creeks and tributaries in the mornings, but then migrate to the back of these places throughout the day. Some of the best and most predictable top water action can be found in the back of small creeks at dusk in 55-degree water. That's right, top water. Of course 55-degree water isn't that cold, but it could have been 45 degrees that morning.

All of this is determined by the weather on a particular day. The shallows will not warm up on a cold overcast day, and the shad will not move to the shallows on these days. The wind has to be considered as well. What we have been talking about are primarily surface temps and shallow fish. When the wind blows it moves surface water, which is the layer most affected by a single day's weather. On a windy day the surface temps on one side of a lake are usually very different than the other because the surface water is being pushed to one side. During bad weather surface temps will be much lower on the windy side. In good weather the windy side can be much warmer. In winter, forget the old adage about fishing the windy side. Go to the side with the warmest temps.

This shows how weather can influence water temperature and shad movements during the

course of a day, but it also influences shad movements over the course of the winter season. As temperatures drop even more, large numbers of shad may move further down the lake seeking even more stable water. During a warming trend they will likely return to the same creeks and tributaries.

Shad will also move vertically throughout the day. Shad can be found either deep or near the surface at any time, but they are more likely to be deep in extremely bad weather such as when it's sleeting or snowing. These are the days when vertical presentations such as a jigging spoon are at their best. The very next day shad may be back on the surface.

If you really want to catch more fish in the winter learn to recognize shad movements and how it relates to the weather. The best way to do this is to pick one creek off the main lake on your home waters, and spend half a day in that one creek on every trip starting in the fall. During this time, work on finding the shad and then staying with them. Eventually you'll see the patterns of shad movement throughout the day and season.

Once you actually see this for yourself the proverbial "light bulb" will go off and so many things regarding basic patterns will become clear. Every so often on a calm warm evening when the surface is like glass you'll actually be able to see schools of shad rise to the surface directly over the creek channel and migrate to the back. You can also watch these schools get hammered by bass, on the surface, and in the winter. Pay particular attention to the location of these bass. They are almost always on some sort of obvious structure adjacent to the creek channel such as a point or ledge, and these fish are aggressive.

Spending time on one creek like this will also help you understand your electronics. Shad that are on or very near the surface will not show up on your graph. Just because you aren't seeing them doesn't mean they're not there. You have to figure out if the shad are gone or just below the surface. This is a skill that will serve you well in every season. If they did leave the creek channel, where did they go and why?

Over time you'll develop a feel for what the shad, and in turn the bass, are doing. You'll know what depths to target, and you'll also develop presentations and techniques for particular situations. In other words you will develop your own seasonal patterns. Not that you have to find patterns based on shad, but it sure is a good place to start. Of course, just about the time you do it'll be spring, but you'll be ready next winter.

See you on the water.

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