

Bass Food

By Larry D. Hodge

The simple answer to the question of what largemouth bass eat is: “Anything they can get into their mouths.”

While there’s a lot of truth in that statement, it doesn’t offer much help to the angler trying to select a lure, fishing location and presentation that will catch fish.

That’s where I come in. I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.

Bass Aren’t Really Bass

Largemouth bass aren’t really members of the bass family, which includes freshwater fishes like white bass and yellow bass as well as striped bass, a species that can be found in both fresh- and saltwater. Largemouth bass are actually sunfish, like their cousins the bluegill, redear, longear and warmouth, but they don’t look like their relatives.

Largemouth have much more streamlined, elongated bodies than other sunfishes and a mouth that extends beyond the rear edge of the eye, hence the name. Their elongated bodies and overall color gave rise to one of their common names, green trout.

Largemouth do share one characteristic with other sunfishes: They are aggressive predators that will strike almost any kind of bait, live or artificial. The key to catching them is putting something in front of them that resembles food in terms of appearance, smell or motion.

Finicky Feeders They’re Not

Freshly hatched bass fry live off their egg sacs for the first few days of life. As soon as they develop mouth parts, they begin feeding on microscopic animals, and when they get to be about an inch and a half long, their diet switches to what will remain their primary food for the rest of their lives — other fish, including their own schoolmates. Bass grow up in a tough neighborhood. If they don’t eat their brothers and sisters, their brothers and sisters will eat them.

Fortunately, there’s usually plenty of other food available for growing bass — otherwise, most lakes would contain only a few very large bass that had eaten all the others. Fingerling bass will feed on insects, crayfish and other small fish, primarily various species of sunfish and shad. As bass grow larger, so do their foods of choice, though variety is always the common thread.

“Bass are opportunistic feeders — if they can chase it down and get it into their mouth, they will try to eat it,” says Craig Bonds, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department fisheries biologist from San Angelo. Bonds’ master’s thesis was on the food habits of black basses (among other sport fishes). In his research, he used plastic tubes to remove the stomach contents of bass for analysis.

Bonds found that adult bass will eat whatever they can catch and swallow, including other fish, crayfish, frogs, salamanders, snakes, mice, turtles and the occasional duckling. “Predators are limited to what size food they can consume by how wide they can open their mouth — their gape size,” Bonds says. “A predator fish like a bass has a big stomach, and the esophagus leads directly into the stomach, so it’s hard to say where the esophagus stops and the stomach begins. I’ve seen bass with the tail of a big sunfish or shad sticking out of the esophagus into the

mouth. The fish had captured the absolute largest prey it could, given its gape limitation. One 16-inch bass I collected had eaten a 9.5-inch shad.”

A popular theory holds that bass will eat the biggest prey they can find in order to get the maximum return on the amount of energy they expend capturing the food. (I’m not sure bass have the ability to solve mathematical equations.) This leads to the often-repeated adage “To catch a big fish, use big bait.” On the other hand, availability also plays a role. “Since bass are opportunistic feeders, if there is something available that is so abundant they can eat a lot of it without expending much energy, they will,” Bonds says. I witnessed this in action while fishing on Lake Amistad. Hordes of 12-inch bass were feeding on tiny silversides at the surface, and my fishing partner and I caught and released more than 50 fish in half an hour. Anything we threw into the mass of fish got bitten almost as soon as it hit the water.

A Food Pyramid for Bass

If you think of the menu for largemouth bass as a pyramid, the broad base will be composed of bluegills and other sunfish. Next up the ladder will be threadfin shad and gizzard shad, and at the top will be crayfish. (Naturally, this assumes that these species are available in a particular body of water.)

“Bluegills are an extremely important prey base for bass,” Bonds says. “In a pond, you can have a quality bass fishery with no other forage. Bluegill females can spawn multiple times in one season, and this provides a continual supply of small sunfish for small bass. Plus, bluegills can grow to 10 to 12 inches long, providing prey for a wide range of sizes of bass.”

During the spring bass spawning season, bluegills are nest predators and eat largemouth fry, so both males and females regard bluegills as the enemy during that time. “If you are targeting bass up in the shallows in spring, a bluegill pattern might work,” Bonds advises. “However, remember that bedded bass strike lures as a reaction to the invasion of their territory more than to feed. Because you are dealing with opportunists, so much of bass fishing is not matching the prey base but using the lure that fishes those conditions efficiently.” Many anglers fishing for bedded bass have success with a soft plastic lizard or a live water dog (a particularly ugly kind of salamander sometimes called a mud puppy).

Threadfin and gizzard shad are both significant bass foods, but with an important difference. “Threadfin shad grow to only 4 to 5 inches long, so they provide better prey for intermediate size bass,” Bonds says. “Many times bass and shad spawn at roughly the same time, and gizzard shad sometimes grow as quickly or more quickly than young bass, so many times young bass cannot feed on gizzard shad during their first year. But when bass reach trophy size, they can feed on gizzard shad. Trophy size fish will usually eat larger sunfish and larger gizzard shad.”

An exception to that rule may come in winter, when water temperatures fall and threadfin shad fall victim to cold stress. At that point threadfin shad become lethargic, easy pickings, and bass gorge on them. A bonus is that shad have high energy content, so bass get a lot of benefit for the effort expended. This becomes doubly important in winter, when cold water slows fishes’ digestive processes and their metabolism in general. They move only when they must. That’s why bass fishing can be slow during winter. Try using a shad imitation and fish it very, very slowly in deep water.

Bonds found a significant difference in food preferences between largemouth bass and smallmouth bass. “A large component — about 75 percent — of the diet of smallmouth and spotted bass was crayfish,” Bonds reveals. “The largemouth’ diet in my study consisted of about 20 percent crayfish on an annual basis. However, the study lake did not have much vegetation. Lakes with hydrilla have lots of crayfish, and fish go in there and feed on them.”

Whether bass are feeding on crayfish or bluegills hiding in hydrilla, dropshotting plastic worms into hydrilla in 16 to 18 feet of water in spring and early summer can yield lots of bites. Most of the fish will be small, but eight-pounders hang out in hydrilla, too. In late summer and early fall, heavy, ounce-and-a-quarter jigs and crayfish-imitating soft plastics dropped through hydrilla in 20 to 25 feet of water and bounced on the bottom won't catch as many fish, but the fish they do catch will be big. Use 80-pound braided line and a medium-heavy or heavy rod to pull fish out of the grass.

So Many Lures, So Little Time

The popularity of bluegills with hungry bass can affect what size lure will work best at a particular time of year. "In summer and early fall, there will be an abundance of small prey, so downsize your lures," Bonds says. "In spring there may be only intermediate and large forage available, so you may need to upsize your lures."

No matter what the major prey species, anglers should take a number of factors into account. Bonds cites the recent craze for horny toad lures. Horny toad lures imitate small frogs, which Bonds found to be only a minute portion of a largemouth bass's diet. "However, if you fish a horny toad lure under the right conditions, on top of matted vegetation, you can catch large numbers of bass," Bonds says. (Catch the bass in the right mood, and a marshmallow on a hook might work as well.)

Also pay attention to weather. "Many times wind is a boon to anglers," Bonds reveals. "A good breeze that ripples clear water positions the fish shallow and they feed better. Burn a spinner bait under the surface or use a noisy top water like a buzz bait. If the water's calm and the sun's shining, you have to finesse the fish and go a little deeper, perhaps dropshotting a small soft plastic. If the water is turbid, the best strategy is to target isolated, shallow cover and use flashy or noisy bait, like a crank bait with a wide wobble or a spinner with big blades, so fish can locate the lure by sight and sound."

No matter what the time of year or the weather, remember that a bass is ruled by its stomach. Someone once observed that you can be sure of one thing about a largemouth bass: No matter where it is, that's exactly where it wants to be. And that's where it can get the most to eat with the least amount of effort.

"Bass will be where they are because that's where the food is," Bonds says. "For example, in fall threadfin shad typically migrate to the backs of creeks. I don't know why, but I do know the bass will follow them, and fall is a key time to fish the backs of the creeks. In summer, a lot of shad go to main lake habitat, so bass tend to be more prevalent on points and humps and near main creek channels. The shad are roaming in open water, feeding on zooplankton, and bass ambush them when they get close to structure."

And there you have it. Catching bass is as easy as finding what they want to eat and where they want to eat it, and making them an offer they can't refuse at the end of your line.

Sometimes.