

Learn the bass's habits and you will understand why it is Number One.



Lessons of the Largemouth

DAVE WHITLOCK

I HAD WAITED AN ENTIRE year to return to Paul Leonard's lovely Texas bass lake, and my anticipation exceeded even the expectancy I have had to fish the wonderful spring creeks of Montana, the rivers of Bristol Bay, Alaska or the flats of the Florida Keys. At last the day arrived and I was in store for an afternoon of fly fishing for largemouth bass—as exciting as any fishing I have ever experienced.

For the previous two days my wife, Joan, and I had endured the gusty winds and bitter chill of a late March. Paul and I had braved the nasty weather and had caught a number of one- to three-pound bass on sinking-tip lines and deep, slow-moving black-and-purple Eelworms and Hare's Waterpup streamers. Fishing was fun, but difficult.

Paul and his wife, Nancy, had to return to Fort Worth the third day—just as the warm Gulf weather neutralized the bitter wind and chill. We said good-bye to them after a big ranch-style breakfast, and I grabbed my fly rod and hopped into a neat new john boat. The high hazy sky lowered by noon, bringing with it a soft rain. As I rowed to the first shoreline, the air seemed to promise something special.

My feeling was confirmed after only a couple of casts by the determination of the first bass's rush to the purple Waterpup. The fly had barely hit the water next to an overhanging bush when it vanished in a vicious swirl of water and moss. Four pounds of prime largemouth! That fish was in shallow water and aggressive, strong indications there would be no need fish deep and slow. Without hesitation I switched to a floating line and tied on a floating, diving minnow.

DAVE WHITLOCK, a professional writer, artist and fishing instructor, is author of *Dave Whitlock's Guide to Aquatic Trout Foods* and the *L.L. Bean Fly-Fishing Handbook*.

For the next two hours I had sport as fine as I have ever experienced from any water or fish. I would cast the 1/0 silver minnow Dahlberg Diver on the brushy, stump- and log-strewn bank, pull it in and softly pop it once or twice. A heavy wave would rise behind the fly and the goosebumps would rise on my arms.

Each menacing bass seemed to come at least six or eight feet with the first noise the fly made. A foot-long pull on the fly line made the Diver submerge three or four inches. Suddenly a bass would pounce on it with an almost evil strike. These bass averaged about three pounds and had the strength of fish twice their size, and more than one of them pulled the 12-foot john boat out into the lake before I could stop it!

After about an hour and four bass I had perfected the routine and timing: I cast the Diver minnow along an old duck blind platform into a small cove. When the fly splatted down on the flat surface just outside the blind's legs, the water bulged and moved from under the platform toward the fly—*that wake was big!* Once, twice, three times I dived the fly and each time the water seemed to swell but without a strike. I could feel the fish's presence, so I just took a deep breath and waited . . . five . . . 10 . . . 15 seconds. How cool I was. Then it happened: The monster calmly opened its big bucket mouth and began vacuuming the entire area around the fly. That sound—which I forever will remember—destroyed my cool and I struck before the fly was entirely within those leathery jaws. The big bass calmly returned from whence it had come and refused to give the uncool fool another chance that day!

I called Paul that night before we headed back to Arkansas and reported the big bass's location. He said it never made another appearance that season.



Poppers, like the bumble bee at right, provoke lurking largemouths to make savage strikes—especially if the popper is made from a softer material such as deer hair.

Understanding Bass

TO BE THE NATION'S number one gamefish, the largemouth bass must have a lot to offer to please such a diverse group of anglers. Fly tackle certainly brings out the best in this fish's substantial character. I can honestly say I have yet to introduce bass to a fly fisher who was not most pleasantly surprised, impressed and enthused with the experience. The time is at hand when the majority of fly fishers will regard bass as special as trout and salmon. The first step is to understand the bass's character and lifestyle.

The largemouth is the Mister Cool of freshwater fishes. It is extremely adaptable to a variety of water conditions and quality, and requires no more than initial introduction into a suitable environment to establish itself in good numbers despite natural predation or fishing pressure.

Of the popular freshwater gamefish, the largemouth ranks highest in intelligence. I am continually amazed at how quickly and well wild bass in large aquariums solve feeding and lure problems. They adapt extremely well to space, cover, food, danger and competition.

Only the bluegill comes close to the largemouth's intelligence. When put to the test, the largemouth becomes selective and cunning much more quickly than any trout! And on the evolutionary scale their large, boney mouths, sharp spines and coarse scales make them more advanced and superior organisms to trout.

From the first day they begin to eat, bass stalk or ambush their prey. As they increase in size and age their food choices expand to what is available for them to catch and swallow; minnows, other fish, crustacea, invertebrates, aquatic and terrestrial insects, amphibians, mammals, birds and reptiles are candidates for a largemouth's menu. Such a variety of foods makes the bass most open minded in accepting new and different food opportunities. Thus, the fly fisherman has a choice of matching natural foods or using some brainchild conceived at the vise to take bass.

Territoriality

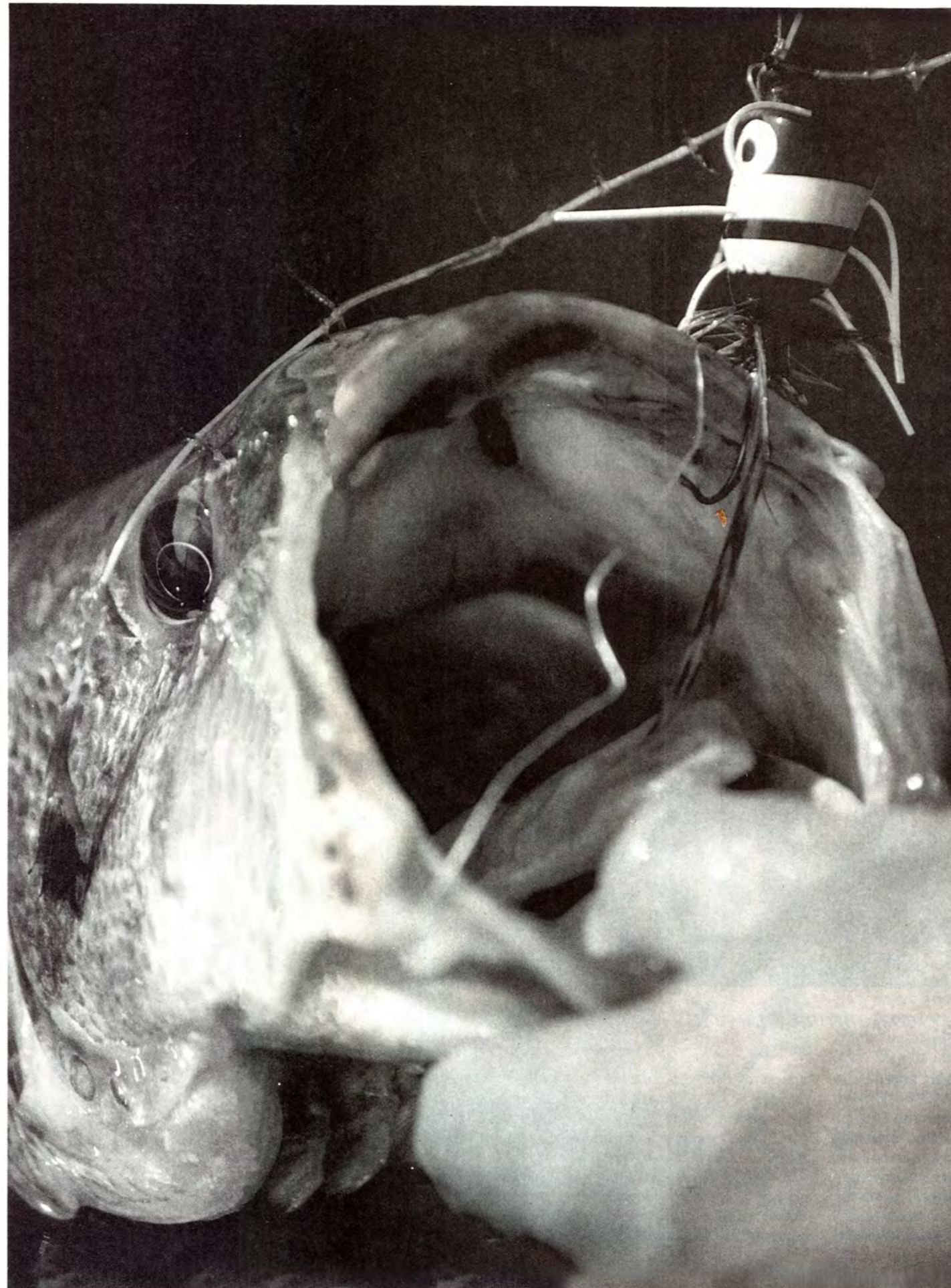
THE LARGEMOUTH IS BOSS of its space in most waters. It can be made angry or excited or aggressive without its being the slightest bit hungry, so you can tempt the fish with a favorite or new food imitation or just provoke an attack with an exciter fly.

Largemouth are designed for jungle warfare. They are masters of concealment and ambush, capable of seeking and destroying prey in the manner of a cat. Either way, the attack is business-like but awesome.

Structures of nearly any description in the water attract largemouth, but they especially prefer aquatic and terrestrial vegetation, living and dead. Moss beds, reeds, water lilies, cattails, cypress roots, willows, water bushes, fallen trees, stumps, logs sunken boats, boat docks, fence rows, bridges and duck blinds are always prime areas to fish. Rocks, ledges, and reefs are second choice when the others are not available. Conversely, smallmouth bass prefer vegetation-free structures such as large boulders, ledges, dikes, reefs, cut-banks, rubble and sand-bottom areas, and only use the largemouth's spots if nothing else is available. Both smallmouth and largemouth bass will lie on the shady side of the structures with their heads pointed toward the direction of the best exit or food source.

The largemouth does well in all water types but prefers the sheltered structures in rivers, swamps, canals and lakes that offer protection and food. When hooked the fish heads right back into the protective structures or explodes—mouth wide open and head shaking—a length or two above the surface as many times as it takes to rid itself of the irritation.

Young largemouth up to 12 inches frequently form wolf-pack attack groups and savagely chase and attack schooled minnows such as shad,



AUTHOR'S ILLUSTRATION

shiners and dace. Mature largemouth seldom make long direct chases at their natural foods but wait for or mingle with them to strike without warning so quickly that others in the area seldom are alarmed. When there is insufficient food available at home, bass cruise and attack alone, in pairs or small groups, like coyotes working rabbits.

The largemouth can always be counted on to be in well-oxygenated water in the 60- to 70-degree range with good cover and ample food, so you will find them moving with weather and seasonal changes that alter the water conditions. Generally, when the water gets above or below their comfort range along the shoreline, they swim to deeper water or spring holes and become much more of a chore to find and catch on flies. Even when they suspend themselves in the comfort of thermocline zones they try to do so where weeds, standing flooded trees or rubble give them cover.

The largemouth's character is unlike a trout's, but it is just as complicated and interesting. But how do you apply knowledge of the largemouth's character to deceive the fish?

Largemouth Strategy

IF YOU WERE TO EMULATE a bass, avoiding predators and catching your food by mouth, here is how you would do it: First, you would wear clothes that blend with your environment. You would conceal yourself in the shadows and vegetation and move about with the least possible disturbance. You would be most secure and active during twilight or darkness. You would have good close-range vision, especially sensitive to peripheral movements. Just as important, you would hear and feel any movement from large or small, fast or slow objects and home in on them to locate them quickly without actually seeing them in the dark. You would have a sensitive nose and a mouth that could smell, feel, and taste the real from the unreal.

You would boldly ambush prey, particularly if it were moving away quickly or you were very hungry. If the food seemed cautious—moving slow or in a position to escape. If the prey seemed to be of questionable value, you would slowly stalk as near as you could, and at point-

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Largemouth . . .



DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

The end of a successful stalk: the author with his prize.

blank range strike with your large open jaws and strong mouth vacuum. In either case you would return to your home's security to eat your catch if it felt, smelled and tasted desirable—if it did not, you would immediately *expel* it! Largemouth have an acute sense of feel and seldom hold any object more than a second if it feels unnatural.

Thus, the most functional bass flies should be designed to look and move like live food. They should be large enough and colored for visibility in low light. They should emit ample low or high frequency sounds to stimulate a bass's sound sensors. They should be snag-proof to avoid hooking the structures you are fishing over, through, or on. The materials used should feel, and even taste and smell, like live food! A soft deer-hair frog is much more convincing than enameled cork.

Your leader should be strong and long enough to separate the fly from the line's tip for a good presentation, usually seven to nine feet, tapering from .022 inches, 20-pound test to .012 inches, 10- or 12-pound test with as few knots as possible. Each knot is a potential snag in bass cover. Eight, 10- or 12-pound test tippet seldom discourage a strike. The strong line is necessary to drive a large hook into the bass's tough mouth and to muscle it away from its jungle into the clear where it is forced to show its stuff by jumping and running. Even a two-pound largemouth can separate you from your fly if it gets a head of steam going through its home briar patch.

A lot of short, accurate, pinpoint casts with these creature-sized bass flies always are better than fewer and longer, less accurate casts. The special weight-forward bass-bug floating and sinking-tip fly lines facilitate one-back-cast

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As Steve Rajeff, André Puyans, and other avid flyfishermen know, Sage makes a darn good fishing rod. Random excerpts from the letters we get bear that out: "Its design, workmanship, and appearance are second to none. In fact, the Sage rod is by far the nicest rod I have seen in all my years of observing fine tackle. . . ." "The autumn-brown color makes all other rods seem undesirable. It has the power to cast my weighted nymphs with less effort than any graphite I've tried previously. It also has the finesse to make long casts, using small dries, to spooky trout. I intend to purchase another this winter. . . ." "The Sage rod was so far superior, so infinitely better, there was no contest. I've cast everything from glass to boron; this rod model #GFL 690 is the finest fly rod ever made—bar none. . . ." If you'd like to see what all the excitement's about, send for our latest catalog: 9630 N.E. Lafayette Street, Bainbridge Island, Washington 98110.



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Largemouth . . .

Continued from page 73

deadly accurate 30- to 60-foot presentations with big creature-flies. These two fly-line designs are most efficient and practical for casting and fishing bass flies that float, dive, swim, hop or crawl on the bottom in waters six inches to 15 feet deep.

The fly-rod which best suits largemouth fly fishing must be designed to pick up, cast, and present various meaty flies from #8 to #5/0 without false casting. It must be powerful enough to cast 20 to 80 feet, strike a large hook well in a bass's mouth and pull the fish away from the structure it wants to get in or under to escape. The same powerful, parabolic but stiff or fast-action rod must also be sensitive enough to transmit unseen pickups or takes of a deep-swimming fly. A bass fly rod should also be fun and a pleasure to use without destroying your arm after a few hours of casting.

Before graphite, there was no material or rod design that could satisfy all these requirements. The 8½- to 9½-foot, 8-, 9- and 10-weight, glass or bamboo bass rods were beasts to use — which may explain why I and so few fly fishers didn't care for bass fly fishing some 25 years ago.

Now many graphite fly rods in the 8- to 9½-foot, 6- to 10-weight line ranges make delightful bass rods. L.L. Bean, Sage, Orvis and Scott Powr-Ply among others make splendid 8¾-foot, 4-ounce, 7- and 8-weight graphite rods designed especially for bass fishing. These "bass-



JIM VINCENT PHOTO

bug rods" make fly fishing for bass exciting and pleasurable and they double beautifully for light saltwater, large trout and steelhead rods!

The fly reel I prefer for bass is one that holds the 7-, 8- or 9-weight lines and 100 yards of 18-pound braided-dacron backing. The backing is handy in keeping the fly line coils large and improving the retrieve speed. You should expect to see few if any bass run much more

than 30 to 40 feet of fly line, but if your bass share the water with pike, musky, strippers, snook, bowfin, large catfish or gar, sooner or later you'll need the backing. I prefer a multiplier reel over a single-action because it helps clean up slack fly line when a fish is hooked almost as fast as an automatic fly reel without any of the disadvantages of the automatic. Martin, Valentine, Shakespeare and Orvis make low to medium-priced, large-capacity multipliers with extra spools that are ideal for bass fishing.

Lighter tackle offers lots of sport, particularly if the bass are in more open waters and willing to eat smaller foods. The small flies (#14 to #8) that will interest largemouth up to five or six pounds are usually gobbled up by ever-present smaller panfish such as bluegill, long-eared, red-eared, painted and green sunfish, and yellow perch. That's not bad, but it can limit the number of bass you catch.

One particular aspect of fly fishing for bass sets it apart and above trout and salmon for me and others who love it—bugging for bass is *never passive*. Every minute is a hunting experience—casting a small lively creature into the bass's jungle and trying to manipulate it to provoke an attack. When the attack comes it is usually more exciting and awesome than you expect. No other gamefish has more character nor as many moods as the largemouth bass. He has a lot to offer and that is why he is Number One!

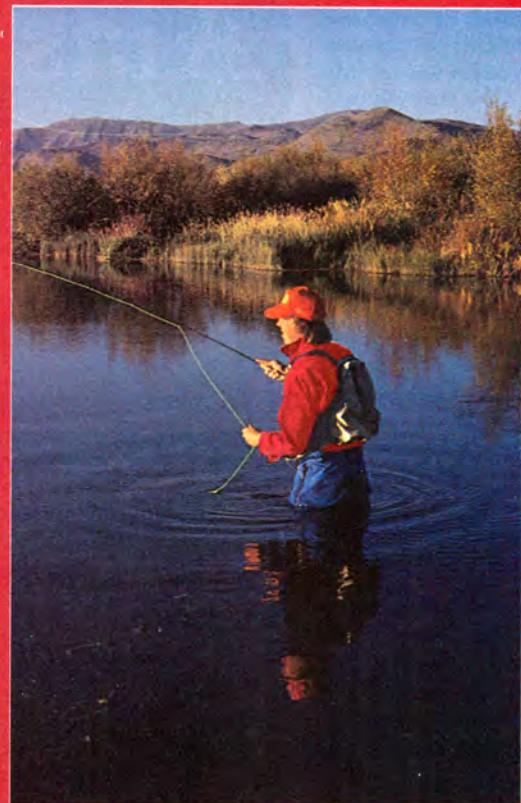
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