

Tips to help catch bass within the freshwater ponds in HHP

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Pros know what they are doing, amateurs must experiment

Pros will know why they choose a particular lure, use a specific type of retrieve, and have selected a particular color.

Amateurs must experiment. Don't hesitate to change lures or vary your retrieve until you find what the fish want that day. Pre-plan doing this. For example, have in your mind at least 3 lures you intend to try that day. If the first lure you try works, great; but, if not, you will be ready to try others without feeling you are having a bad day.

Learn from each fishing trip. Ask yourself, "What did I learn today?"

The thoughts that follow are intended to provide a strategy that anyone can use to maximize their chances of catching bass that are in the ponds in Hilton Head Plantation, whether or not that person has any prior experience or knowledge of how to catch bass.

Fishing the ponds in Hilton Head Plantation requires a different strategy from what I was accustomed to using in Tennessee. I have had to learn to catch fish in Hilton Head Plantation. You can too. We moved to Hilton Head in April 2013. My personal best afternoon in Hilton Head Plantation was 61 bass in a 2 ½ hour period during the week before Christmas 2013. During the first week in April 2014, I caught 42 bass on Thursday afternoon, 37 on Saturday afternoon, and 45 on Sunday afternoon. These fish were caught in different ponds, on different lures, which means the strategy and techniques used were universal in nature within Hilton Head Plantation.

Be an "SOB" -- Share your fishing knowledge with others

I was once a member of a fishing club in Tennessee called "Sly Ole Bassmasters." Members were generally referred to as the "SOB's"

Purpose of this fishing club was to help all members become better fishermen by sharing fishing knowledge. It was recognized that everyone, even the very experienced fishermen, could learn from others; i.e., what goes around, comes around.

Tournament rules -- If any competitor asked about your fishing situation, you must tell him the number and size of fish you have caught, the type of lure and retrieve used, the type of structure and character of bottom, the depth at which fish were caught, and any other info that would help him have a chance to catch more bass that day (e.g., shady banks, windy gravel points). However, you

did not have to identify the specific location(s) where you caught the fish. This rule ensured that every member of the club, regardless of their level of knowledge and experience, would have the chance to learn from others, and do so while on the water competing with others in a tournament.

The theory behind the tournament rules was that the best fishermen would over time still rise to the top, and that their level of success would be a reflection of their individual knowledge and skills, and not be based on sheer luck. Everyone had a chance to learn from others, and catch fish while doing so during the tournaments.

You can teach an old dog new tricks

Do not get stuck on one lure. Open your mind to new things. Experiment with new lures and retrieves.

Many years ago, I tended to fish plastic worms, Rapalas, crankbaits and twister tail grubs almost exclusively. These are all excellent lures, but I had varying success.

We had a timeshare in Shipyard Plantation. One year we brought one of my son's friends with us. At the beginning of our vacation, we went to Walmart, and I told my son and his friend that they could pick out 2 lures each that they wanted to try. One of the lures my son's friend chose was a double-bladed buzz bait. Nothing in nature looks like a double-bladed buzz bait. I thought his choice was interesting, but didn't think he would have much success with it. Within 2 days, he had caught an 8 lb. largemouth bass on that double-bladed buzz bait.

I was an old dog, but I was willing to learn a new trick. Buzz baits are now my favorite lure because they are so much fun, and they tend to catch big bass. Bass often make a huge commotion when they strike the lure. Sometimes they will knock my lure a foot into the air, and occasionally they will do a somersault in the air while trying to get the buzz bait.

After I learned to experiment with a wide variety of lures, my success rate has gone up dramatically.

Search out the really dumb fish

Sometimes bass will say "Here I am, bet you can't catch me." They reveal their location and level of aggressiveness in various ways. Always be on the lookout for signs of these fish, and immediately go after them.

Signs that bass are there:

- (a) Large area of splashes exploding on the surface of the water due to a group of bass that are actively feeding on a school of bait fish
- (b) Multiple swirls on surface, or single splash or swirl on surface
- (c) Bubbles in circular pattern (one or more sets of bubbles) -- the bubbles are evidence of prior splashes made by bass that are feeding on baitfish at the surface; i.e., the bass are in a very aggressive mood
- (d) School of minnows that scatter

- (e) “V” shaped pattern of water moving across the surface -- a fish is “pushing water” as it swims quickly very near the surface of the pond
- (f) “Nervous water” -- small ripples, not made by the wind, at a time when the surface of the rest of pond is as smooth as glass
- (h) Ripples that are moving in a direction opposite to that of the wind

Last Tuesday was last Tuesday

It is not unusual to see fishermen who go back to a place they recently had luck catching fish, but become frustrated and disheartened because they were not catching anything that day. They may even spend hours at one spot or lagoon hoping the fish will begin to bite. Sometimes, they are waiting for the specific time the fish had been biting the last time they were at that lagoon.

Just keep in mind that every day is a new day. Last Tuesday was last Tuesday, but unfortunately this is Wednesday (or Friday, or the following Tuesday, etc.). Do not be surprised that the fishing is not the same as it was the last time you had luck at a particular spot.

Check the spot out, but move on if you are not catching fish. You can always come back and check it out again later in your trip.

Most of the fish are not where you are. They will not come to you, you must FIND them

Most of the fish are not where you are; therefore, do not hesitate to move on to another spot or pond if you are not catching fish.

The fish will not come to you, you must FIND them

The secret of successful fishing is being able to find where the fish are active (though not necessarily feeding). Catching the fish then becomes simply a matter of determining the best lure and retrieve for the conditions and the fish’s mood.

Finding and catching active fish is largely a matter of time management. Make the best use of the limited time you have available to fish. In Hilton Head Plantation, we are fortunate to have many ponds which we can fish. If you are not catching fish, move on and try somewhere else.

Do not become stuck at one spot, or at one lagoon. Unless that spot or lagoon is regularly producing bites at that moment, move on to another spot or lagoon.

Normally, I am almost constantly moving. I “walk the banks.” Generally, the fish in our ponds do not congregate in large groups – our ponds do not have “structure” to which a group of fish would gravitate and hold. Instead, the bass in our ponds are normally scattered. As a result, most of the time you are searching for individual fish; i.e., one here, one there. As an example of “walking the banks,” I will cast along the bank, and, if I do not get a strike, I will walk about half way toward where my first cast landed before I make my next cast. By doing this, I can cover (check out) a lot of water for active fish in a short period of time, while minimizing the chance of spooking any fish

that may be laying near the edge of the water.

It is not unusual for me to fish 4 or 5 lagoons in a 2 ½ hour trip.

One afternoon in the week before Christmas 2013, I caught at least 61 bass (maybe as many as 65) and 1 large bluegill in less than 2 ½ hours. I could have continued to catch more fish, but I ran out of sunlight. Before finding those fish, I had spent about ½ hour fishing two other lagoons while catching only 2 bass. If I had spent a lot of time at those prior two lagoons or if I had not moved on from those ponds, I would have caught far fewer fish, or possibly no more fish at all.

In March 2017, my nephew came to visit us. He is an experienced fisherman. At first when we were fishing, he was confused about why we so often left a pond that looked really good to him after only a short period of time fishing that pond. However, about the third day of his stay, he caught 50+ bass. During one period that day, he began laughing because he was catching a fish or at least getting a strike on almost every cast. He couldn't believe what was happening. The next day we had been fishing a pond for about 15 minutes when he said to me "Uncle Richard, I know I have caught two fish and had two other hits, but I think we should move on to another pond."

Fish feed only part of the time, they react instinctively 100% of the time

Fish are driven by the sense of hunger only during limited periods of the day.

Fortunately for fishermen, fish have a pea size brain. They are opportunistic predators. They will react to and strike at a lure even though they are not hungry, because they do not want to miss an opportunity for an easy meal. They cannot help themselves. These instincts are working 100% of the time.

To maximize your chances of finding active fish, use lures and retrieves that cause a fish to react instinctively. After you find the active fish, you may find that you can catch more of those active fish using other lures or retrieves than the one you used to find them in the first place.

Typically baits that look like things that actually exist in nature (e.g., worms, snakes, frogs, minnows, bream, bugs) and are retrieved in a slow manner tend to work best with fish that are hungry. Because they are worked slowly, they limit the amount of water you can check out during the limited time you have available to fish.

Other lures look like nothing in nature (buzz baits, spinner baits, in-line spinners). These lures, such as a buzz bait, can be used to cover lots of water quickly, and attempt to force a fish to react instinctively; and, therefore, can be good lures to help you find active fish.

The hard part, and real challenge, is finding the active fish. Once you have located them, try to "strain the water." Let's say you have caught 6 fish at one pond in a short period of time, but the bite using that lure has slowed down dramatically. Since you already know fish are active in that pond, spend at least a little time trying several other lures (and retrieves) to see if a different lure or different retrieve is what will really trigger the fish to strike at that moment. It is often a difficult challenge to find active fish. Therefore, once you locate a promising lagoon, check it out thoroughly.

Lunker bass are not "sly," they are simply lucky

There is no reason you cannot catch a lunker bass. They are no different than normal size bass; there are only fewer of them

They have simply been lucky that they have not been eaten, injured, or suffered disease.

A lunker bass (like all fish) is instinctively "wary" of potential danger, and, therefore, can be easily spooked. They have experienced more than younger smaller fish, and may be more wary than younger smaller fish; but, they are not, however, "sly" such that they are uncatchable. Fish have pea size brain, and, therefore, will react instinctively.

Because of their size, lunker bass may be able to take control of the locations that are the "best" from a bass' perspective. Similar to the behaviors of human adults as compared to the behavior of children, lunker bass will be less likely to expend unnecessary energy to obtain the food they need. For example, lunker bass will be less likely than smaller fish to follow or chase a lure; and, as a result, you will need to place your lure close to where the lunker fish is located in order to increase the chances of catching that fish.

The only lunker you can not catch is the one you just spooked

Fish in shallow ponds, like most of those in Hilton Head Plantation, often stay near (relate to) the edges of the pond (banks/shoreline).

Too often, I see fishermen who simply walk up to the edge of the pond they plan to fish and begin casting. Then you will see and hear a commotion in the water near the bank, or see a "V" on the surface going away from the bank toward deeper water. Sometimes, the fish is so large that the commotion it makes can startle, or even scare, the fisherman.

When approaching a pond for the first cast, stop 15 to 20 feet or so away from the water's edge and make 3 casts in front of and to the each side of the place you plan to walk up to. Catch the lunker (or small bass) that's there, don't scare it away.

The only thing between you and the fish is your line -- pay attention to it

Fish live in water, and can easily swim in any direction after hitting your lure. Because of this you may not feel the fish take your lure -- but your line can tell you that it has.

Line tightens (most of slack is taken out of line) -- fish is beginning to move
 Line moves in a direction different from that you are making it move -- fish is
 swimming sideways relative to the direction of your retrieve
 Line becomes slack -- fish is moving toward you

*** Crappie fishing “Just like on TV” (line only tightened)
 Drew with bail open “Look how deep this lagoon is” (line moving away)

Fish do not have hands

Fish do not have hands -- If a fish takes your lure, he will have it in his mouth. He may soon spit it out, but he will have had it in his mouth.

Too often, people I am fishing with will say “I think I just had a hit,” but they do nothing to try to set the hook. Because they were not sure if it was actually a fish hitting their lure, they are reluctant to try to set the hook. They do not want to be embarrassed.

When you retrieve a lure, pay attention to how it feels while it is moving normally through the water. If you feel something (anything) different from the normal retrieve, set the hook. Many times a fish has hit or taken your lure. Do not miss that fish, because you could be embarrassed, set the hook.

It is true that sometimes you may have simply struck or snagged on some obstacle on the bottom, but what is normally the worst that can happen if you do set the hook? -- you will move the lure quickly for a brief period of time.

What the Mama fish said to the baby fish – “Don’t ever, No never, swim like a Rapala”

My son’s favorite “go to” lure is a floating Rapala which he fishes as a twitch bait. He says he has never fished a Rapala and not caught a fish. It is the lure in which he has the most confidence.

Each person and even each pro may have a different favorite lure -- Carolina rig plastic worm, jerk bait, pitching a jig & pig, bumping a crankbait along the bottom, etc.

Find a lure for yourself that you have confidence in -- let it be your “go to” lure. Use it when the going gets tough. If you start to become disheartened, use that lure because you are more likely work it properly, and, therefore, will more likely catch fish. At the end of your trip, you will also at least feel that you gave it your best shot.

How to identify structure in a "structureless" pond

I moved here from Tennessee, and was accustomed to fishing lakes from a boat, and "structure fishing." Just like the charter boat captain's here may fish bridge piers or reefs and ship wrecks on the ocean bottom, I was accustomed to trying to locate unusual bottom conditions at which the bass tended to hide or congregate; e.g., underwater trees in 40 feet of water, stump rows, brush piles, drop-offs, gently sloping gravel points, old house foundations, prior ponds that were now flooded, etc.

The ponds within Hilton Head Plantation, present an entirely different set of conditions. Our ponds are generally shallow and "structureless" (the bottom conditions are the similar throughout the pond).

How do you find fish in a structureless pond?

Fish relate to edges and unusual changes in surface or bottom conditions.

The shoreline of a pond is an edge -- most of the fish I catch are within 15 feet of the bank.

Shady banks, overhanging trees, weeds, lilly pads

Areas of clean, hard bottom

Drainage pipes -- Never pass up the end of a drainage pipe, or concrete culvert. They are unique features within a pond, and the flow of water will erode the bottom creating a trench that bass will hide in, especially following a warm rain.

Pond scum (usually duckweed) on the surface of the pond -- this provides shade, and if the pond scum covers a large area, the fish can be scattered everywhere under the pond scum; i.e., this is one situation where you do not tend to limit your exploration to the edge of the pond

The main reason I "walk the banks" is because there is so little structure to fish, but I know they will relate to the shoreline. A second reason, and almost as important, is bass that are feeding will seek out those places where the bait fish are located; the small bait fish often try to hide in the shallow water (and within the weeds, etc.) along the edge of the pond.

Fish prefer not to have the same meal everyday

What fish want varies from day to day. Just like we may have a craving for steak, Mexican food, or Chinese food, apparently fish also do not want the same meal every day.

Don't get stuck on a favorite lure -- experiment, change lures frequently as necessary until you find which lure and retrieve the fish want that day.

If you are fishing with a partner, use a different lure from that your partner is using to help find out what the fish want that day.

Fish will have a definite preference. For example, my son caught 31 bass one afternoon in a 1 ½ hour period using a floating Rapala as a twitch bait. I could have used the same lure, but I wanted to experiment to see if the fish were simply active and would hit anything, or had a preference for a particular lure and retrieve. I fished a buzz bait, spinner bait, spoon, twister tail grub, lipless crankbait and an in-line spinner, and ended up catching only 5 or 6 fish. I have attempted this type of testing on several occasions, and have found that bass can have a definite preference of lures and retrieves, and that preference can vary from day to day.

Fish do not like to bask in the sun

Unlike humans, fish do not like to soak in the rays. They tend to avoid shallow sunlit areas. This is especially true where the water is clear.

On cloudy days, bass are more likely to roam freely. However, on a sunny day, bass tend to remain close to "cover;" e.g. weeds on land at edge of pond, weeds in the water, tree limbs overhanging the water which provides shade, deadfalls (trees that have fallen into the water), vegetation on the surface such as lily pads or pond scum, pipe or culvert openings, etc. This offers them easy access to food, cooler waters, and a sense of security.

Fish cannot wear sunglasses, but I do not believe that that the sun's rays hurting their eyes is the reason they normally avoid shallow sunlit areas. I believe the reason is far more basic -- predator/prey.

Bass are predators. They look for prey. They are opportunistic ambush predators. But they can also be prey – to larger fish, birds and alligators.

Bass are dark on top and light on the underside. This is nature's way for allowing them to blend into their surroundings. Dark on top to blend in with darker water, or the bottom of the pond when viewed from above. Light on the underside to blend in with the sunlit surface when viewed from below.

Being in a sunlit shallow area is for the fish like having a spotlight on him, making him stand out; a condition fish instinctively want to avoid. On National Geographic shows, it is always the young, weak or injured that the predators seek out and attack; i.e., prey that stands out from the group.

What are a fish's options for avoiding shallow bright sunlit areas?

- (1) Deeper water, deep enough that the sun's rays do not penetrate.
- (2) Some type of "cover" that will serve as a hiding place and ambush point, such as weed beds, brush piles, deadfalls, rocky areas, pipes, culverts and troughs. This "cover" offers them easy access to food, cooler water and a sense of security.
- (3) Areas in the shade.
- (4) Dingy water through which little light can penetrate.
- (5) Wind swept areas where surface waves are reflecting or diffusing the sunlight.

Fishing is generally best early in the morning and late in the afternoon, periods when the sun is low in the sky. At such times, shadows are long thereby increasing the area of the water that is in the shade. More importantly, the sun's rays are approaching the water surface at a shallow angle, and, as a result, will be more easily reflected away, with less light penetrating into the water. This shady, low light penetration condition allows fish to come out of deep water, or other hiding places, into areas which make them more accessible to fishermen.

Bass are cold blooded killers

Humans are warm blooded. Our bodies maintain a constant temperature, one normally quite different from that of our surroundings.

Bass are cold blooded. Their body temperature is the same as that of their surroundings.

Just like humans, bass have preferred temperatures for their environment. If the water is too warm, fish may go to deeper water, which is normally cooler water. If the water is too cold, fish may go to shallower water if that shallower water is warmer than where the fish currently are located. It is a Goldilocks situation -- not too warm, not too cold, just right.

Unfortunately for the fish, and for fishermen, water temperatures throughout an entire pond may be too hot, or too cold. The fish cannot leave. Therefore, their bodies must adjust. When the water is too hot or too cold the fish adjust by becoming less active.

Bass are predators -- cold blooded killers. But when the water is cold they become lethargic. When the water is cold, the fish's metabolism slows down. They become less active, feed less often, and will be less willing to "chase a meal." They may also have moved to deeper water. Generally, during cold water periods, bass tend to be sluggish. Smaller lures that are moved slowly (sometimes agonizingly slowly) often are best.

Fish do not adjust well to sudden changes in water temperature, especially rapidly changing from warm water to colder water. A cold rain can shut fishing down for a day or so. However, a warm rain during the cold season can cause fish to become much more active than normal.

If a kid has fun, you will too

If you fish with a child, focus on them having fun. If they have fun, you will too.

Using a light action spinning rod, 6 pound test line, and small lures (in-line spinners, jerk baits, twister tail grubs, small spinner baits) will normally provide the greatest chance for a kid (or an adult) to have a lot of fish activity.

*** Timeshare at Shipyard When my son was in maybe 8 to 10 years old, he wanted me to watch him catch and land fish so I could see how good a fisherman he was (he is a much better fisherman than I now). Therefore, I would walk behind my son as he walked the banks throwing a buzz bait or jerk bait. Because he was so good, I ended up fishing "strained" water." But he and I now have great memories.

Fishing is an adventure and a challenge, not a task -- Fish for fun, not results

Fish for pleasure. Don't make it work. Don't get down on yourself because you are not having any luck. Don't get wrapped up in the number of fish you have or have not caught.

We are fortunate here in Hilton Head Plantation because we have a large number and wide variety of fishing ponds that we can enjoy. At the worst, when you go fishing you will have experienced beautiful scenery, seen a variety of wildlife, and, if you "walk the banks" like I do, will have had at least a degree of exercise.

One of the reasons I carry binoculars in my fishing bag is to be able to see the wildlife.

"Damaged" lures -- To fish, or not to fish, that is the question

Some people will not fish a lure because a lot of the paint is missing, one of the hooks is bent, the rear set of treble hooks has come off, etc I believe this is the wrong attitude. My favorite lures are those that have been "damaged" by fish.

It is true that the lure may not look pretty, or may have to be repaired, but, repair it if necessary. Keep in mind that something about that particular lure caused fish (multiple fish) to attack that lure, and I want to have this same lure in the water so that other fish will also have the opportunity to attack it. A "damaged" lure does nobody any good if it stays in the tackle box, or on a shelf.

A safe fishing trip is a fun fishing trip

One of the primary goals of fishing is to hook the fish, not yourself (or your fishing partner).

I have ended up with fish hooks in various parts of my body -- a condition you may want to avoid. For example, one day I caught about a 2 ½ lb. smallmouth bass on a deep diving crankbait which had 2 sets of treble hooks. While attempting to remove the hook from the fish's mouth, I managed to hook myself with the smallmouth still flopping around. On another day, it was windy, and I was throwing a Rapala which had 3 sets of treble hooks. As I was making a cast a gust of the wind blew the lure sideways and as I came forward in the cast I managed to sink at least one hook from each set of treble hooks into the back of my head.

After the hooks are removed, you will need to have a tetanus shot if you have not had one within the past 5 years.

Lures such as a floating Rapala will have 2 or 3 sets of treble hooks (a total of up to 9 hooks). Buzz baits, spinner baits, plastic worms and twister tail grubs only have one hook. Normally, it is much safer to use the lures with the fewest hooks.

Prior to making a cast, be sure your lure is within about 6 to 8 inches from the tip of your rod. This will insure that the lure is not too low as it goes forward in the cast.

Always "lip a bass" in order to paralyze it while you are removing the hook(s). I am right handed and use my right hand to remove the hook. For a right-handed person, place your left thumb into the fish's mouth, and the middle joint of your index finger under the fish's jaw, and lift the fish upward with your index finger. The bass will not flop around while you are removing the hook(s). The other advantage to lipping a bass is that you do not touch the sides or tail of the fish, reducing the chances of injuring the fish.

Travel light -- It's better for you, and for your fishing

You need to be able to move to find the fish

Note: See photos of tackle bag, tools and lures

Alligators can be a "nuisance"

Be wary of alligators. Most of the time, they will not bother you. But, when you have a fish on, and the fish creates a commotion, alligators may try to get that fish. This is especially true if you have a large bass on. Alligators will also come up out of the water onto the bank to get a fish that you have dragged up onto the bank. This type of activity is an alligator being an alligator. This is a situation which you can occasionally encounter and must learn to deal with.

It is very important that you keep a pair of scissors handy so that you can cut your line if necessary. It is one thing to lose a fish, or a fish and a lure; it is quite another thing to have an alligator drag your rod and reel into the water.

One technique which can reduce those problems is to work the fish (have it swim) along the bank for a significant distance before you take it out of the water; that is, create some distance between the extraction point and the alligator. Another technique is to hide the fish from the alligator's view; which sometimes involves holding the fish behind you as you take the hook out.

When you release a fish, do not do so near where an alligator is located. Walk down the bank to a point that will allow you to release the fish and let it swim away before the alligator would be able to reach the fish and eat it. Keep in mind that sometimes the fish you have caught may be stunned or exhausted, and may need extra time to recover once they are in the water before they will attempt to swim away.

The goal when landing or releasing a fish is to avoid any possibility that an alligator will associate fishing and fishermen with an easy source of food.