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## Bassin' basics

**How to gear up and hook up for the greatest fight on water.**

**Brian Brecka and Ken Snow**

A leapin' largemouth ready to tussle with a crankbait.  
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It starts with a cast, a rod-throttling strike, and a hook set that bends your rod like never before. A battle ensues with eye-widening jumps. Finally, the fish is in hand and respectfully subdued. After a quick snapshot, you release it back into the water. Your day is filled with more fish catching and continuous smiles. Before you know it, you're downright obsessed. The whippoorwills sound their evening song, you call out "last cast", hoping for just one last bit of excitement. You retire your rod and reel, but just for the day. As you travel homeward, you're already planning your next outing. What could cause such newfound passion? Bass fishing in Wisconsin!

Wisconsin boasts largemouth and smallmouth bass angling that is second only to walleye fishing in popularity. Bucketmouths and smallies together are the most widely distributed recreational fish in the state -- found in lakes, cool and warmwater streams, and large rivers. No matter where you live in Wisconsin, you're within a short drive of quality bass fishing.

If you're thinking you can't fish bass without a fancy boat and a dozen rods, think again. Given minimal tackle, bass can be caught from shore, by wading, or by canoe, float tube or your grandfather's 14-foot flat bottom boat. No matter how you plan to fish, our bass fishing basics should provide enough information to get you on the water this summer catching bass.

We know some readers enjoy dunking worms for panfish or leeches for walleyes, but we're leaving the live bait at home. Those baits are effective bass catchers, but we're concentrating on artificial lures. As you become more accomplished, much of the fun is seeing how many different lures can fool bass into biting.

Let us introduce you to five basic categories of bass fishing lures: surface lures, spinnerbaits, soft plastics, jigs and crankbaits. For each category, we'll describe the bait; share techniques and tips for using them effectively; recommend locations and best fishing times; and match the lures to appropriate rod, reel and line weights.

### Surface lures

Surface lures, also called "topwaters," float on the surface and cause a disturbance that bass can see or hear. The fish also sense the lures' vibrations through their lateral line. Lure types in this category include poppers, frogs and buzzbaits.

**TECHNIQUES AND TIPS:** A popper is the perfect lure to cause surface commotion that stimulates strikes. The front has a concave cupped face that "spits" water when moved, sending sounds and vibrations of struggling prey. The popper's color and size is often matched to initiate bait fish. A short jerk of the rod moves

the lure from a few inches to a foot or more. Don't continually reel-in during the retrieve, but pause between jerks. Reel up the slack line, then attain a rhythm on your retrieve to stimulate strikes. *Jerk-jerk-pause, jerk-jerk-pause* is a good rhythm to start your fishing day. We find most strikes occur during the pause phase. Vary the duration from less than one second to five seconds or more. Experiment with the rhythm, and the bass will tell you if you're providing what they want.

Strikes can be aggressive, and for many anglers there's nothing better than watching their lure being attacked. If a fish has your lure, it soon provides pressure to your rod. When you feel it, set the hook. Poppers have treble hooks that provide a good hook-up percentage.

Another surface lure that's worth trying is a rubber or plastic frog. Frog imitations are fished across lily pads or in a canopy of duckweed. They are designed to skirt and hop across thick overhead cover without hanging up in the vegetation. Bass rely on their lateral lines to detect the lure's vibration. A slow and steady retrieve works well, but an erratic presentation may also produce fish. If your frog lure comes to an opening, stop and give it a few tantalizing twitches.

When bass strike a frog, there is no doubt you've been bit – the fish explodes through the canopy. Less experienced anglers (and even experienced ones) may be startled by the force of that strike, and they instinctively jerk the lure away from the fish. We've seen this many times when fishing with first-time froggers. To ensure the bass inhales the lure, wait one or two seconds. Tighten your slack line, *then* set the hook. Don't be surprised if the bass strikes at the frog but misses it. Just cast back to that same spot. Many times, the bass will strike again.

Buzzbaits are surface lures that have at least one rotating blade that provide continual turbulence when retrieved. The lures have silicone skirts and one upright hook at the rear. Although not weedless, they can be retrieved through open water vegetation such as lily pads and across logs. You need a continual retrieve to keep the blade rotating. Vary your retrieve speed to find what stimulates bass strikes. Buzzbait size, color and style may also influence your success. Landing percentage for buzzbait bass is usually high. Set the hook shortly after seeing the strike.

**LOCATIONS:** Surface lures are most productive in shallow water six feet and less. In general, as water clarity increases, so does the depth where surface lures are effective. Cover such as stumps, logs, vegetation or boat docks are likely areas to concentrate your efforts. When fishing rivers, shallow waters where the current breaks can also hold fish.

**BEST FISHING TIMES:** Dawn and dusk are both excellent times to fish surface lures. However, other times can be productive as well. Cloudy days can produce popper or buzzbait bass anytime. Frogs are often most effective during midday on sunny days.

**ROD, REEL AND LINE:** In open water areas with minimal cover, try a spinning or baitcasting reel matched with a medium action rod. Monofilament line in the 8 to 12 pound range will be adequate. When fishing heavier cover, a baitcasting reel and medium-heavy to heavy action rod will land more fish. Heavier monofilament (14- to 20-pound) or braided line (30- to 50-pound) may be essential when fishing areas with dense overhead cover.

## Spinnerbaits

**DESCRIPTION:** Spinnerbaits are easy to use and they find fish quickly. The two traditional types are the inline spinnerbait and the safety pin style spinnerbait. The inline has a spinner blade in direct line with a weighted body and a treble hook that is usually tied with hair. Examples include the Panther Martin and the Rooster Tail. Safety pin style spinnerbaits have a blade or blades directly over a single hook and are usually dressed with a silicone or rubber skirt.

**TECHNIQUES AND TIPS:** Spinnerbaits find fish quickly. Retrieve inline spinnerbaits fast and don't allow the lure to sink more than a few inches below the surface. Try this "burning" fast retrieve around fallen logs, brush or rock that are often favorite smallmouth bass hangouts in northern Wisconsin lakes. Though inlines still have their following, they're not used as much today as years ago. Ironically, given their limited use, try tying one on because bass may not be wary of this bait.

The safety pin style spinnerbait can be fished just about anywhere. It can be retrieved through vegetation, brush and fallen logs. To trigger strikes, let the lure make contact with the cover, then give it a small jerk and a fast retrieve, a so-called "bump and run" presentation.

**LOCATIONS:** Although we've seen fish come from depths of 20 feet or more to smash a burned spinnerbait, most cover that holds these fish will be less than six feet deep. You can quickly cover long shoreline stretches or island perimeters with these baits.

**BEST FISHING TIMES:** Spinnerbaits are a great choice during the early morning hours, on cloudy days or after dark. However, don't be afraid to try them at other times as well.

**ROD, REEL AND LINE:** For inline spinnerbaits, try a spinning reel matched with a medium action rod. Monofilament line in the 6 to 10 pound range will be adequate. The safety pin style spinnerbait works best with a baitcasting reel paired up with a medium-heavy action rod. Choose a monofilament line in the 12- to 17- pound range. You need the heavier line to pull a spinnerbait through heavier cover.

## Soft plastics

**DESCRIPTION:** It doesn't matter if you're in Wisconsin, Florida or points between, more bass are caught on soft plastic lures than on any other bait. Why? First, a lot of anglers throw them. Second, they're fished for good reason – bass find soft plastics irresistible.

As the name implies, these molded lures are flexible and produce life-like movements when fished. Soft plastic choices are available in hundreds of shapes, sizes and colors. Traditional soft plastic bass lures include worms, crayfish, lizards and tubes. Each resembles a naturally occurring food. Other forms look nothing like animals seen in the wild. These soft plastics with strangely placed appendages and wings are called "creature" baits.



Properly rigged, a plastic worm can be retrieved over weeds and lily pads without snagging. Bass find them irresistible. © Doug Stamm

**TECHNIQUES AND TIPS:** Because there's such a wide offering of soft plastics, we recommend starting basic with a plastic worm. Your arsenal can expand to crayfish, lizards, tubes and creature baits after you've had success pitching and retrieving worms. Start with a black or purple worm that's six or seven inches long. Dark colored worms work well under varying conditions, and are good bets. Plastic worms are rigged on a "worm" hook that is shaped for weedless rigging. We recommend a size 2/0 or 3/0 worm hook for a six- or seven- inch worm. To minimize line twist, align the worm straight on the hook so it won't spin when

retrieved. Standard worm rigging requires a free sliding bullet weight ahead of the hook. Weight size is dependent upon the depth and cover. A quarter-ounce bullet weight can be used for most situations, but deeper water and heavier cover demand greater weight.

When fishing shallow, target specific pieces of cover such as vegetation patches, logs, stumps or boat docks. After casting near the target, allow the lure to fall on slack line. Most bites will occur as your worm falls to the bottom. A bass inhaling a worm will not throttle your rod or be explosive on the surface. The subtle bites feel like a light “tick.” You may see your line jump or feel a slight rod vibration. Once you see or feel it, wait 1-3 seconds, lower your rod toward the water, take up the slack line, and set the hook. We recommend a powerful hook set, as your hook typically needs to come through plastic before embedding in a fish’s mouth.

If the fish doesn’t bite as the lure drops, employ a lift-and-drop retrieve, just like jig-fishing for walleye. On tight line, lift your rod from the nine o’clock position to the eleven o’clock position. Drop your rod slowly back to the nine o’clock position, reel the slack line and repeat. By using this retrieve, the worm rises off the bottom, moves a few feet and then returns to the bottom. Again, fish usually bite as the lure falls. The lift-and-drop retrieve is also effective in deeper water along submerged edges and points that hold bass in summer and fall.

**LOCATIONS:** Soft plastics are versatile lures. They can be fished deep or shallow in varying types of cover. Vegetation beds, logs, stumps and boat docks provide bass safe havens--cooler water without direct sunlight, where bass can ambush prey. Deep weedlines may extend 10-12 feet in depth, while stumps, logs and boat docks will be found in shallower water.

**BEST FISHING TIMES:** Soft plastics can prove successful from dawn ’til dusk.

**ROD, REEL AND LINE:** When fishing areas with light cover, use a spinning reel with 6- to 10-pound test line matched with a light to medium action rod. When fishing around thick vegetation, logs or stumps, a baitcasting reel with 12 – to 20-pound line and a medium or medium-heavy rod will do the job.

## Jigs

**DESCRIPTION:** There’s no doubt that a jig is one of the best and most consistent artificial lures to catch fish. A jig consists of a lead head molded to a single hook. Most bass fishing jigs come with a plastic bristle weed guard over the hook that helps minimize snags. Jigs come in many designs and colors, with or without rubbery skirts. Some come ready to fish, while others are sold as components that allow the angler to rig his own jig head with separate soft plastic lures such as a grub, crayfish or shad body.

Two jig types are most commonly used – one with a bullet-shaped head where the line is tied on near its nose, and the other with a round or flat face where the line is tied from an eye that protrudes off the jig head. A bullet-shaped jig is easier to fish through vegetation, while a round or flat-faced jig is a better choice for fishing around wood, rocks and docks.

**TECHNIQUES AND TIPS:** If you haven’t tried fishing lead heads, now’s the time. One of our favorites is a rubber-skirted jig. This jig presents a bulky profile and is excellent to fish in the thickest cover. This lure is great for pitching into a small area of cover that may hold bass. Your target may be submerged wood under overhanging trees, emergent vegetation, docks or rock piles. Try bouncing the lure through the cover or dragging it across the bottom to elicit strikes. We use a variety of jig sizes and colors and often tip them with a plastic crayfish or pork rind trailer.

We occasionally throw a darter-head jig tipped with a four-inch plastic worm or grub. This jig is fished with an exposed hook and is deadly for catching weedline largemouth or open water smallmouth bass. Present the

darther-head jig with a slow and steady retrieve. The lure imitates a baitfish, and if a bass is near, you'd better hold on!

**LOCATIONS:** Anywhere you can find structure with cover is a good place to fish with a jig. Bass will often bury themselves within the cover and ambush prey as it swims or crawls by. A jig will work from the shoreline all the way out to the outside weedline edge. Factors such as weather, water clarity and available cover will determine where the fish are. If you aren't getting bites on the outside weedline, try within the vegetation or on the inside weedline. It's our opinion that if you can find the fish, you can always catch bass with a jig.

**BEST FISHING TIMES:** Anytime is a good time to fish jigs. Even during hot afternoons, jigs that imitate crayfish draw strikes when minnow imitations don't get a second look. It's tough for a bass to pass up a tasty high protein meal like a crayfish. Crayfish are found across Wisconsin and are very abundant in many bass fisheries.

**ROD, REEL AND LINE:** In open water weedline areas, try a spinning or baitcasting reel paired with a medium heavy action rod. Monofilament line about 10- to 15-pound test will work. As you progress deeper into the cover, use slightly heavier line. You may also find you need to try heavier braided line of the 30- to 50-pound test in thicker vegetation and woody cover.

## Crankbaits

**DESCRIPTION:** If there was ever an artificial lure meant to fool bass into believing it's real forage, a crankbait would be it. First, crankbaits have true three-dimensional design to imitate food no matter which direction or angle they're seen by the bass. There are crankbaits that closely match almost every type and size of natural food.

The most obvious difference among crankbaits reflect the depth they are intended to dive. You'll find long-billed crankbaits dive deeper than short-billed ones. Most crankbaits are made of plastic or balsa wood and carry up to three treble hooks. Balsa crankbaits tend to be more buoyant and generate less noise than plastic cranks.

**TECHNIQUES AND TIPS:** Crankbaits are universal lures that catch fish in and around various cover, given the right conditions. Determine the depth of the structure or cover you are fishing. Next, choose a lure that makes contact with the structure or cover during the retrieve. For example, if you're fishing a rock hump in 10 feet of water, choose a crankbait capable of diving 12 feet deep. When contacting the structure, use a stop-and-go retrieve to minimize hang-ups and draw strikes.

**LOCATIONS:** Some prime locations for crankbaiting include riprapped banks, stump fields, vegetation beds, logs or underwater islands. Depths may vary from less than one foot near shore to more than 15 feet in other areas.

**BEST FISHING TIMES:** Given the crankbait's ability to emit sound, vibration and flash, they're a good lure to use anytime, especially after dark.

**ROD, REEL AND LINE:** A baitcasting or spinning reel paired with a medium action rod are good choices when crankbaiting. A rod with a very slow tip will enhance your hook-up percentage and help land more fish. Six- to 10-pound test monofilament line allows your lure to achieve its maximum depth on the retrieve. Heavier lines may be needed if you're fishing around rocks that cause line frays. Keep in mind that heavier line reduces a crankbait's running depth.

Though fishing TV shows tout southern states like Florida and Texas for great bass fishing, we think the bass fishing in Wisconsin is of unmatched quality. Through resource management and support from anglers, Wisconsin offers both unique and diverse fishing experiences. As long time bass fishing fanatics, we see the size structure and populations of both smallmouth and largemouth bass improving year by year.

We hope our advice will give you the confidence to try different techniques that add excitement to your fishing day. If we've piqued your interest, there are plenty of additional information sources that include fishing magazines, books, videos and the Internet. Learning more about bass life history, behavior, seasonal movements and fishing patterns can increase your chances of success. But book learning cannot replace the benefits of spending time on the water "reading" the situation, adapting to changing conditions, getting in tune with your quarry and enjoying some time outdoors.

As you fish across Wisconsin, enjoy exploring quality lakes and rivers, support conservation efforts and take along someone you'd like to see enjoy fishing as much as you do. The future of fish and fishing depend on it.

**DNR Fisheries Biologist Brian Brecka and his friend Ken Snow are avid anglers who travel Wisconsin fishing for bass.**