No Fish?

Maybe you're fishing where they 'Ain't'

If you are presenting lures or baits correctly but producing no fish, perhaps something has changed! by Buck Perry, Education Editor

When talking to a group of fishermen it is not my nature to make corny jokes. But there is one time I know I am going to get a great big laugh. This is when I make the statement (after viewing a fishing hole) — "I know exactly where the fish are! They are either in the shallows, the deep water, or someplace in between."

Sometimes it takes awhile for this statement to sink in, but you can bet the whole group gets a big chuckle out of it.

While this merriment is taking place, I glance around the room and usually see fishermen exchanging remarks. They are leaning toward one another and I can just imagine what they are saying — "Big deal, any stupid jerk would know that!"

Just a couple of days before I had seen quite a few of these same people fishing their lake. From what I observed, 95 percent of them were fishing as if they didn't know this statement to be true. Most were casting to visible objects such as "stick-ups," stumps, weeds, pads, etc., little realizing they were spending their time working water that contained fish only about 5 percent of the time.

Probably today, years later, these same

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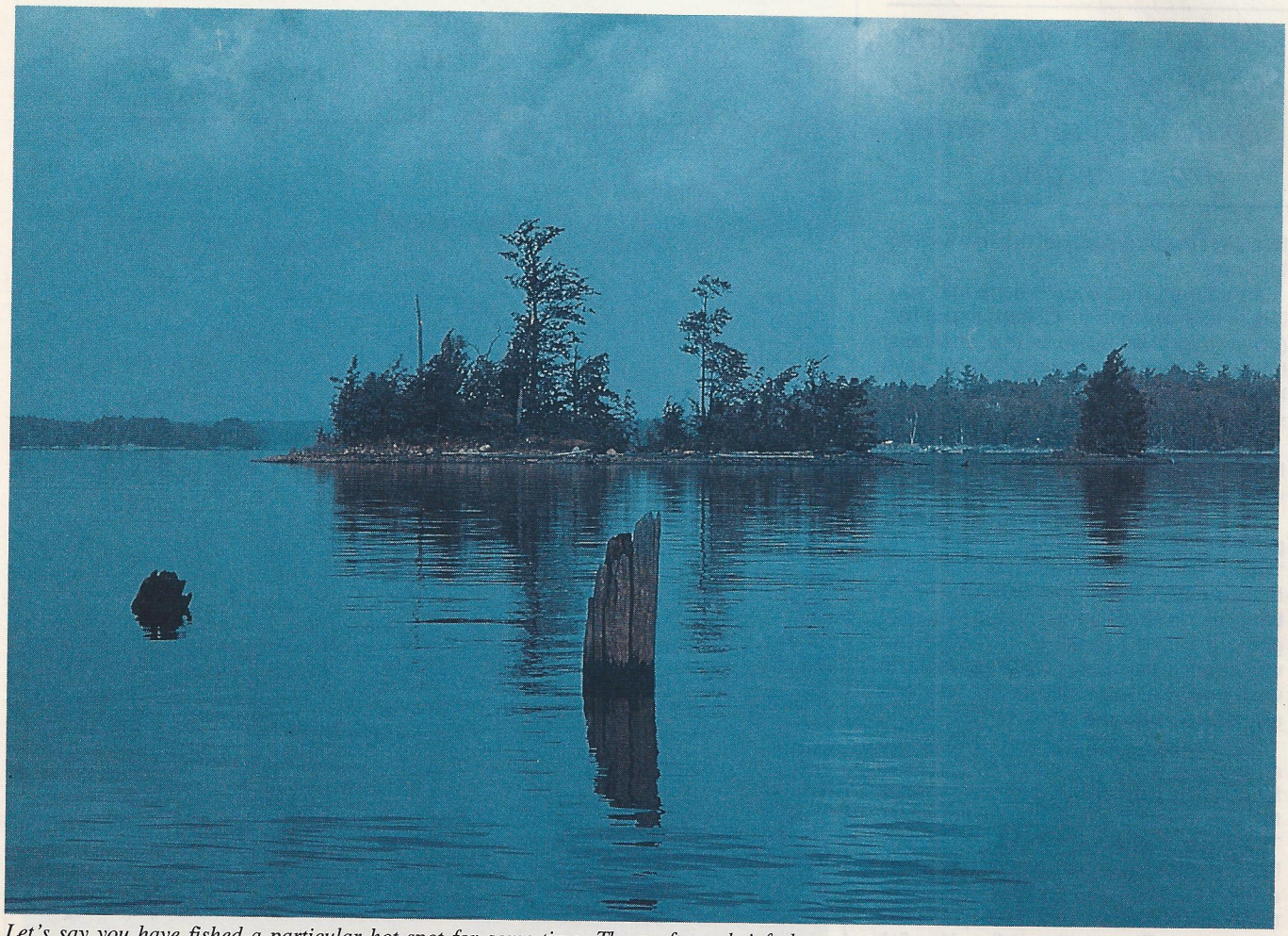

Let's say you have fished a particular hot-spot for some time. Then, after a brief absence, you return to the lake and find the water level 3 to 4 feet lower than you have ever seen it. You fish your favorite spots for several days, and for all practical purposes you should have stayed home and mowed the lawn. As far as catching any fish . . . what happened?

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fishermen who got such a bang out of my statement (that the fish were either in the shallows, the deep, or someplace in between) are still limiting their search for fish in *only one* of these areas!

Observations over the years have shown that the area where many fishermen spend the greater part of their time is the *shallows*. They do not realize that the "in between" waters would contain the fish a lot more time than the area they are fishing, and the "deep" would contain the fish more time than the other two areas combined.

When viewing water depths you do not have to divide them into three sections. You only have to separate the shallow water from the deep water. This is done for two main reasons. First, the fish react differently to shallow water and deep water. Second, you must distinguish between the two for the purpose of lure presentation.

In my studies I have found the dividing line between shallow water and deep water is at the 8 to 10-foot depth. I just didn't pick this depth figure right out of thin air; I made a study of the fish — *they* told me.

"When viewing water depths you only have to separate shallow water from the deep."

As your studies should have told you, it is at this depth (8 to 10 feet) that a fish (upon migration toward the shallows) begins to slow down and probably says to itself: "Whoa, back up, I'm getting too shallow."

With this thought in mind, let us resume the things we had in mind the last time we met (May '87 *Fishing Facts*).

We had been considering how it was possible for a fisherman to come to "your" lake for the first time and make a good catch, while you were drawing a blank at the same time. I stated I was not going into great detail as to "why" but would stick primarily to fishing facts. It would be your job to figure out why one guy scores and the other fails.

For starters, let's say you have fished a particular lake for some time. You have found some bars and humps that produce for you when the weather cooperates. The water level stays rather constant but, lo and behold, you return to the lake after a short absence and find the water level three or four feet lower than you have ever seen it. The weather is fine. You fish your favorite spots for several days, and for all practical purposes you should have been home mowing the lawn — as far as catching any fish. What happened?

Figure 1-A is a side view of one of the bars you have had good luck on in the past. Previous to the time under discussion, the water level in the lake created depths such as those shown in **Figure 1-A**. The top of the bar had "stick-ups" or bushes running out to about 6 feet. Then the bar started dropping off, and finally "broke" into the deep water — the "breakline" occurring at 12 feet. The distance from the "stick-ups" to the "drop-off" is quite a distance. **The "breakline" could not be reached with a cast from any position near the stick-ups (located in the shallows).**

Figure 1-B is the same structure at the time under discussion. The water level in the lake has dropped four feet. Note the depths now.

Although I stated the weather was fine, which indicates the fish are active and moving, we now have a situation where the areas on the structure (bar) that would be classified as "shallow" water and "deep" water have changed. The "bar," as far as the fish are concerned, is now **completely different**. The "breakline" is now at a depth where the fish begin to "back off." If he moves to the breakline, further movement toward the "breaks" ("stick-ups" and bushes) would be few and far between. It is very possible that, in a situation just like this, the structure **could be abandoned entirely**, and another migration route established in the near area.

For our study we will assume the fish are still moving toward this bar. In this case you would concentrate your efforts at the now shallow breakline. You might find, in most cases, when the fish move up on the breakline (end of the bar) there will seldom be a large group of fish, but only two or three. If this is the case, you would remain with the structure for a period of time.

After the first two or three fish moved up, it could be awhile before the next two or three showed. If the fish are moving well, you would have pretty slow pickings as far as any great number of fish at any one time, but if you stay with it you can

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FIGURE 1-A

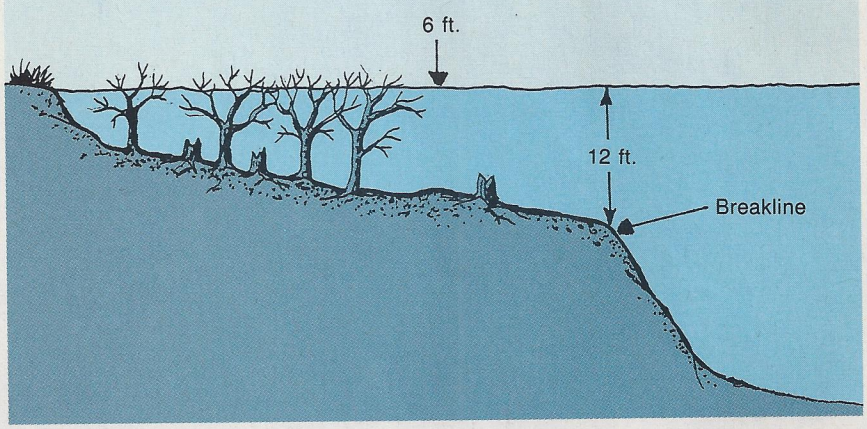
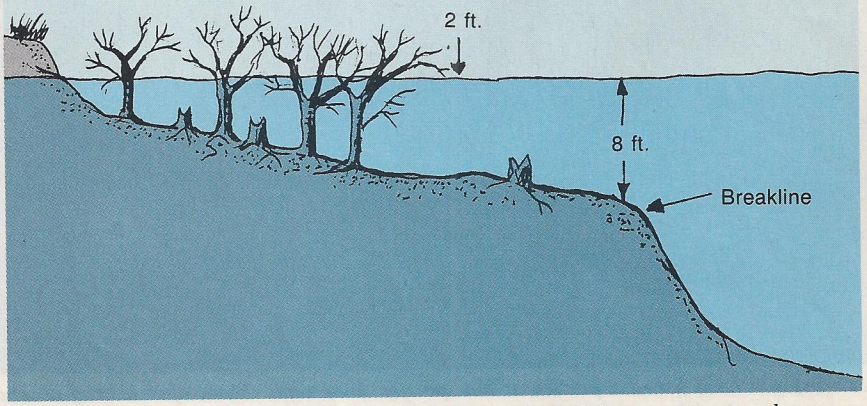


FIGURE 1-B



FIGURES 1-A and 1-B *– Side views of a bar where fishing action can be quite good at times, but then goes sour. Note the water depths carefully.*

Want to talk BIG bass? How's this one for starters? In the following article Education Editor Buck Perry explains the importance of fishing the "in between" waters, as well as the shallows and the deep.

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wind up with a nice catch. The interval between a few fish moving up on the breakline could vary. This would be determined by just how good the weather and water conditions are. It could be as much as an hour.

When I find myself in a situation such as this, I do not wear myself out by continuing to cast while waiting for the next fish to show. I let it rest — by eating a sandwich, having a soft drink, or talking fishing with a partner. Often I catch a wink or two. During this period I might pick up the rod and make *one* cast to see if more fish have arrived. How often I make this cast will also vary, but normally I will check the breakline every 5 to 10 minutes. One thing to keep in mind, when a cast produces another fish *do not mess around*, get him in and go right back with another cast! If you have a partner, direct him to make a cast to the same spot — pronto! Seldom will just one fish show; it will be either two or three.

Normally when I experience a structure becoming too shallow for good migrations of fish, I spend very little time with it. I am off looking for deeper structure, but during the course of the day I will check the breakline a time or two. But I would only check it if I found the fish active and moving on better structure. (If I were "stuck" with a lake that had only shallow structure, then I would check the best ones, as described.)

Let's pursue this same thought still further. In this case we have a hump. This hump has a ridgelike finger running out from it that finally breaks into a channel. This structure **is not** in the main body of the lake, but it is located in a "cove" or an "arm" created by a feeder stream. **Figure 2** is a side view of this structure. Note the depths.

At a high water level such as that shown, this structure has been producing for you. You have at times caught fish on the top of the hump. At other times you have caught them on the breakline (drop-off) at the channel. This has really been a dandy.

BUT the water drops 8 feet. The depth of the channel is no longer 26 feet, but is only 18 feet deep. *You could just about mark the whole thing off.* The DEEPEST water in the area is now not deep enough for the deep-water sanctuary of the fish. At certain periods of the season (colder part) *some* fish may migrate to the area for short periods, but as far as this area holding a group of fish permanently, it would no longer hold true.

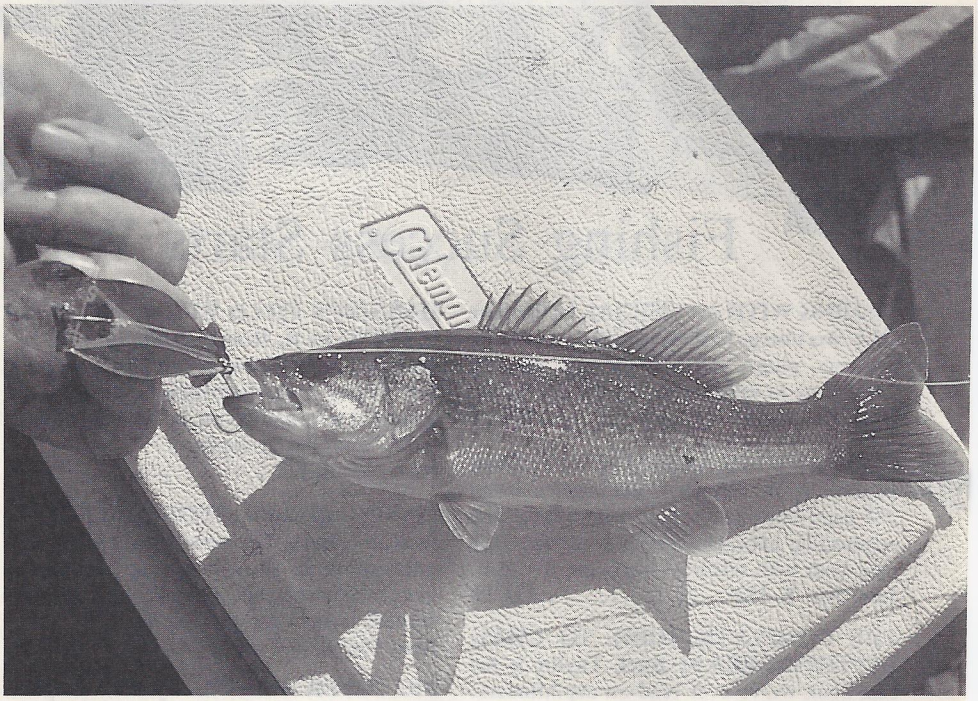
When this happens to one of my good structures, I move toward the main lake until I have water in the feeder channel that is 25-35 feet in depth. Then I start looking for the structure the fish are *now* using.

I could continue this discussion until I have covered every type of structure found in a lake. But these two illustrations of how a depth change could limit migrations and how it could also change the deep-water sanctuary of fish should show you fairly well why one guy makes a catch and another guy gets skunked.

It is possible that the answer to the question involved was obvious to you as soon as you read the original question. BUT just how far did you go? Did you digest the whole question? Completely?

Let's look at it again. The question stated that the water level had changed. It also stated the weather was nice, which indicated the fish were moving. If you look closely it also stated another thing — "after a short absence." Although *not stated*, it should have been obvious the water color had changed. Since the weather was "nice," it is not likely the water level dropping was due to a winter pull-down, but was due to a lack of rain. This would definitely indicate to me the water had CLEARED. (I would have already noted this the *instant* I reached the lake.)

First let us examine that "short ab-



Game fish will attack anything they perceive as food, including artificial lures that are nearly as large as themselves.

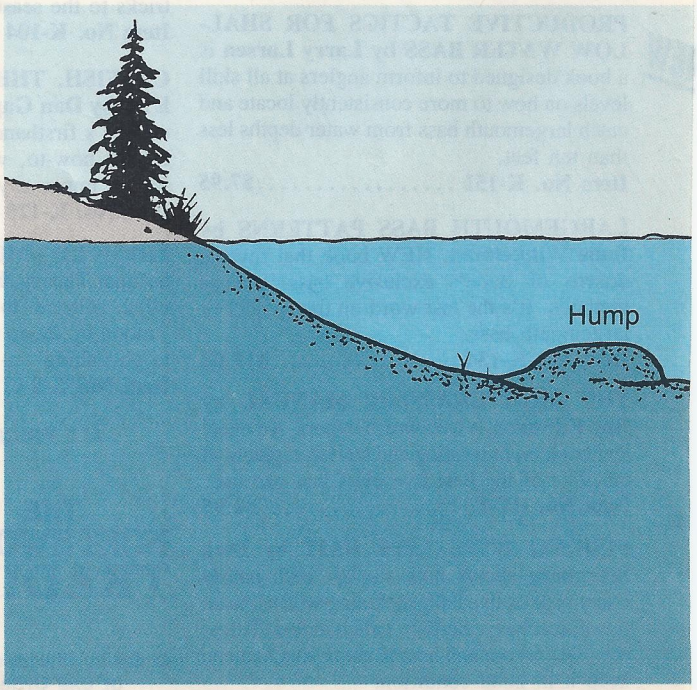


***FIGURE 2** – Side view of an underwater bar (structure). Let's say you have caught fish on top of the hump at times. Other times you have caught them on the breakline (drop-off) at the channel. But now the water level drops 8 feet. The depth of the channel is no longer 26 feet, but now only 18 feet deep. Would this change have any effect on the fishing potential in this area? (Answer given in article.)*

sence." I did not state just what time element was involved, but it could have been a week or so. From the drop in water level "*more than you had ever seen it*," would indicate it wasn't just a day or so.

Let's assume it was "early" season. Your good catches had been occurring on a steeper shoreline, or in bays or coves (maybe full of trees). After your absence you returned to these steeper shorelines and structures in the bays and coves and you experienced the bad fishing. Your structures had not necessarily changed that much due to the drop in water level. But you still drew a blank. Did it ever occur to you that due to the SEASONAL migration of the fish they were no longer in these areas, but were now using longer and flatter structures for their movements?

In looking at the "seasonal" consideration, we could put the time in the latter part of the season and you would be working long, flatter structure when you *should* be working the steeper, shorter structure more.

Maybe you had been having great success in the upper end of your lake early in the season shortly after spawning. You went back to the same area after your absence and couldn't understand why the fish weren't hitting, even though the water level hadn't affected the area that much. You probably never gave any thought to the seasonal migration of the fish, and had no thought to go toward the deeper sections of the lake.

From a seasonal point of view, you must be fully aware of depth and speed control of lures at all times. It doesn't take much time for it to change. The metabolism of the fish can change quickly. Your selection of lure types and presentations should change accordingly. Probably you had been using a particular type lure and presenting it in a particular way as to "produce" before your absence. But while you were gone things had changed, but you continued to make your presentation with the same ol' thing, in the same ol' way. It wouldn't work. Our aim is to catch fish consistently, not just once in awhile.

Let's now examine the likelihood that your waters had "cleared." One of the most important observations that you can make is your water color. This particular thing alone can change the fishing potential of an area more than anything I know. Just the clearing of the water can eliminate more productive structure than you can shake a stick at.

Let's reexamine **Figure 1-A**. This figure showed the water level BEFORE the lake dropped, and during the period of your catches. Now let's assume this figure represents the depths AFTER the water has dropped. This would indicate we have enough depth for good movements of fish.

But now we have a clear-water situation that developed during your absence. The clear water produces about the same reaction from the fish, as we got in **Figure 1-B**. Their movements are limited to the breakline etc.

When this occurs, I concentrate my efforts at the breakline or limit my working of the structure to periods of dark weather. I spend most of my time on deeper structure and, if I found the fish moving good, I'd go check the *breakline* for "straggler" movements, but I would waste no time on the shallow breaks (stick-ups, etc).

In the case of **Figure 2**, I'd just keep moving toward deeper water in the feeder channel until I find the deep structure the fish are now using.

When you are experiencing failure in areas that have produced for you in the past, you must realize that **something has changed!** I have mentioned some of these changes, and in most instances ALL of them had a part to play in your failure. You cannot cite any particular thing as being the cause. You have to investigate all. If you are presenting lures and baits CORRECTLY and producing no fish, you are fishing where they ain't; and you better know "WHY."

"Now THAT'S more like it!" says Jeri Perry (Mrs. Buck).