



Want Better Results?

Look Beyond The Obvious

by Buck Perry, Education Editor

When I am trying to tell fishermen something about "structure fishing" (Spoonplugging), such as the importance of bottom features, weather and water conditions, how fish move, the proper presentation of lures, etc., I may go about it from several different directions. I do this so ALL the fishermen interested will get the points I am trying to make. Some may feel (and state) I am repeating myself, but most of us learn by repetition. Those saying I am repeating myself are probably looking for something new, and invariably it's a shortcut to fishing success. They will not find an easy shortcut because KNOWLEDGE is the true key and this is not passed out to us on a silver platter. We have to dig it out the hard way.

In any case, when I talk to a fisherman I do it something like this:

Figure 1 is a top view of a fishing situation I experienced in the past. There is a bush on a "bar" off a point. I was anchored and crappie fishing at position X.

Shortly after getting to position X I heard a boat coming up the lake. When it was in sight, it slowed and moved toward the bush ("stick-up"). I watched the fisherman lower the electric motor and slowly move into a casting position. It appeared he was using some type plastic worm by the way it looked and the slow way he was using it.

I do not know how many casts he made, but he spent fifteen to twenty minutes casting around the bush. At no time did he indicate a fish might

have made a pass at the lure. Finally he raised the electric motor, cranked up the outboard, and moved on.

It wasn't long before I heard another boat coming up the lake. Again the boat slowed and moved toward the bush. This fisherman practically duplicated the actions of the first fisher-

The questions in my mind were: (1) Why did the first three fishermen fail and the fourth one didn't? (As far as I could see, they were all using the same type lure and working it in the same manner.) (2) Why did the last fisherman catch only one fish? (3) Was it possible some more (and big-

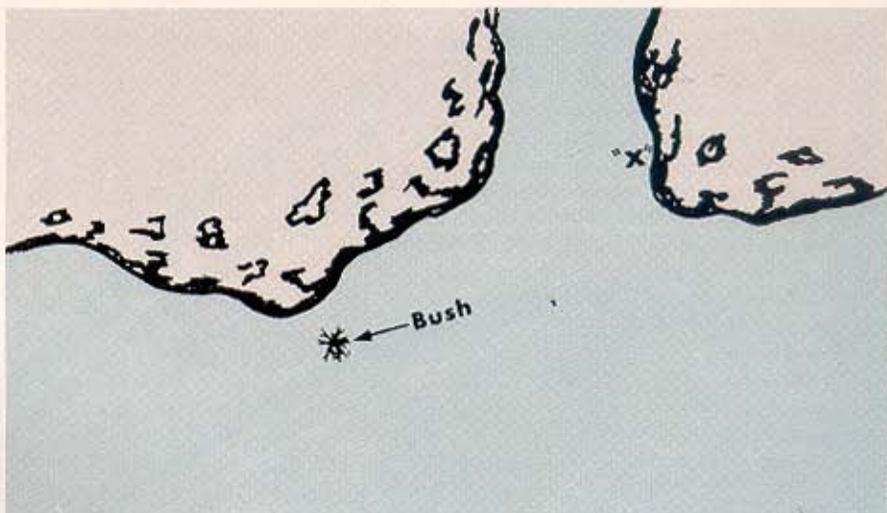


FIGURE 1 - The author was anchored at position X as he observed four fishermen in a row slow their boats and move into casting position. After 15 to 20 minutes of fruitless casting around the bush (a "stick-up"), each angler raised his electric motor, cranked up the outboard, and moved on up the lake.

man. Again, after getting no strikes, he cranked up and moved on. Shortly thereafter a third boat slowed and moved to the bush, and the same scene took place once again.

It wasn't long before a fourth boat moved to the bush. But this time things turned out quite differently. About the second cast towards the bush, the fisherman reared back on his rod and I saw him fight and land a small bass. I watched him make several more casts around the bush. After no more fish, he too moved off.

ger) fish could have been caught?

With these thoughts in mind, I put up my crappie rig and went to find some answers.

To hasten the answers, I started trolling the shallows around the point (and bush). I began trolling with a small lure (Spoonplug) with a running depth that would allow me to work the shallowest water (2 to 3 ft.). After getting no action with this lure size, I switched to a slightly larger model that ran 4 to 6 feet deep. When this

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Jeri Perry displays a 10-pound bucketmouth she caught on a deep running Spoonplug at the 12 to 14 ft. depth level.

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lure didn't produce or reach the bottom, I changed sizes again. I let out 60 to 90 feet of line (two to three colors of No-Bo trolling line) for these smaller lures. (I soon discovered the bush was in water about 4 feet deep.) During all my trolling with each size lure I had them making contact with the bottom part of the time. *I did not have them "plowing" bottom all the time.* If the lures were bumping too hard, it is not likely the fish would be able to pick them up. I had them tipping or walking lightly over all the slightly more shallow sections along the bottom. If the lures were digging the bottom too heavily, I was either using too large a lure for the depth, or I was running too much line for the specific lure size and depth. If the lures did not bump the bottom at all, they could be out of correct position too much of the time, and I may not have had a fish strike my lure if it was just "swimming through the water" all the time. (This is especially true if the fish is a bass, or a marginal weather condition exists at the time.)

Some species of fish may appear to prefer a free-swimming lure over a bottom bumping lure. However, this did not deter my efforts to keep the lure in contact with the bottom where possible. If the lure is not walking the bottom too hard, those fish desiring a free-running lure (or those that can't pick up a bumping lure) will get their chance, as the offering will run free at times. [After all, the bottom-bumping lure has already gotten their attention.] If the bottom is dirty, (muck, weeds, etc.) I will generally keep the lures as close to the bottom as possible without being continually fouled.

I started each trolling pass with a speed that gave the lure a fast wiggle and then increased it at intervals to check for the best or most productive speed. When I got to approximately the 10-foot depth level, I picked up a small bass, slightly larger than the one the last fisherman had caught. I made another trolling pass at the same spot, but this time my lure got hung on something on the bottom. After retrieving the lure, several more passes were made, but with no favorable results.

By this time I began to see the shape of the bottom. My efforts to keep the lure bumping and as close to the bottom as possible showed very clearly a rather narrow, ridgelike "bar" extended out from the point.

I made additional trolling passes from several directions to work the deepest sections of the bar. (In the

deeper sections I let out additional line which would give me extra depth with each lure size.) As soon as a lure ran off the bar (no longer bumping the bottom lightly), I'd turn the boat around for another pass. When a particular lure size would no longer reach bottom, I'd go to a larger, deeper-running size (Figure 2).

As I made a trolling pass at approximately 15 feet deep across the bar, a good-sized bass took the bottom-bumping lure. Another pass in the same area produced another fish. I immediately anchored the boat as

shallow as possible, but still within casting distance of where I had caught the fish while trolling.

A long cast was made toward the deep water with a large, sinking, bottom-bumping lure (Spoonplug). I allowed the lure to sink while slowly taking up slack line until I felt the lure reach bottom. Then, with the rod tip low, a fast, steady retrieve was begun. The lure hadn't walked the bottom more than 4 or 5 feet when another fish grabbed it. Subsequent casts like this to the same spot produced three

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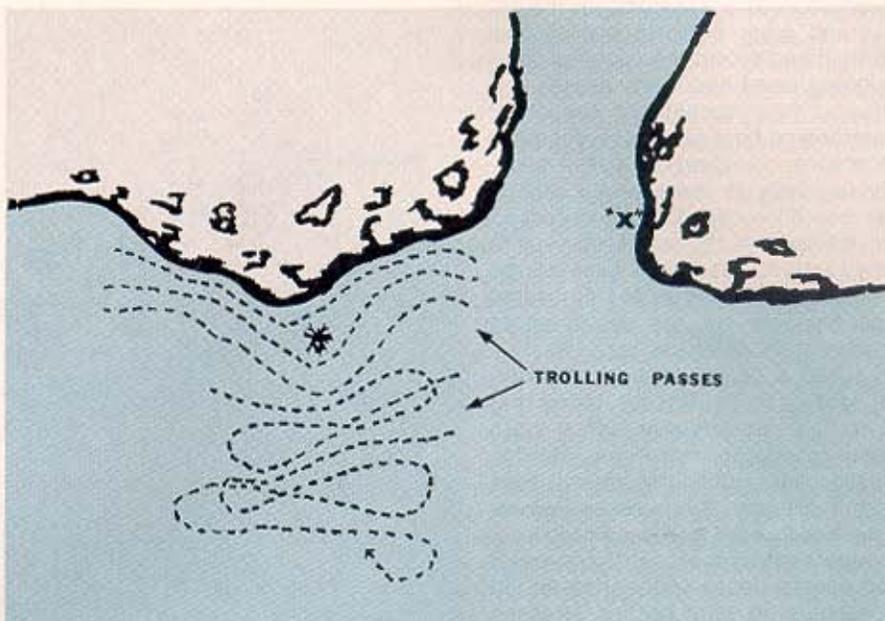


FIGURE 2 - Dotted lines show direction of trolling passes made by Education Editor, Buck Perry. At approximately the 15 ft. depth level, a good-sized bass attacked Buck's bottom bumping lure. Another pass in the same area produced another nice fish.

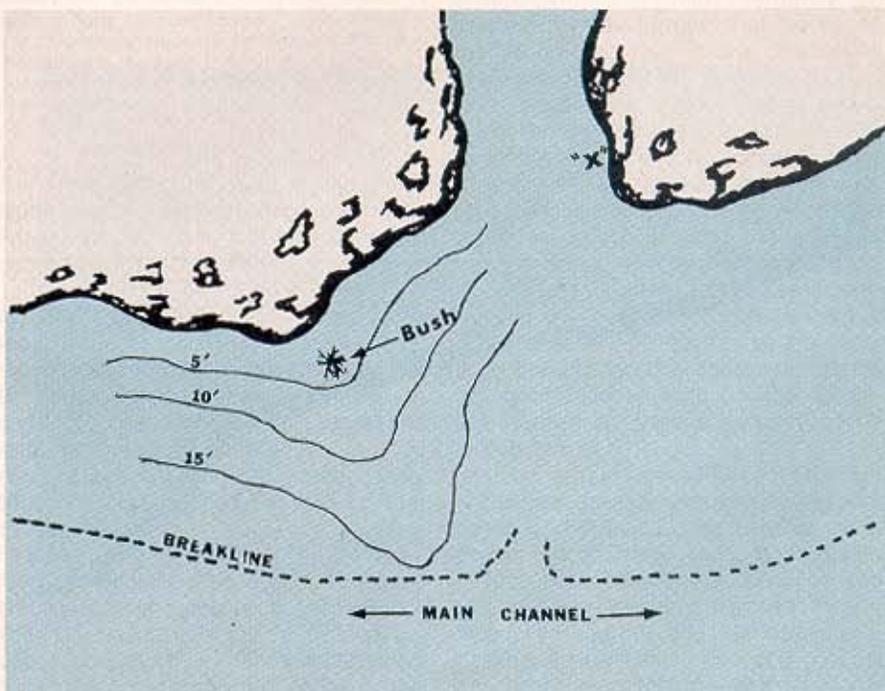


FIGURE 3 - The author's trolled lures quickly showed him the approximate shape and depth of the area surrounding the bush.

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more good bass.

After a few additional casts with no strike, I switched to a jig for a slower speed presentation. After this lure had sunk to the bottom, I'd "jump" it a distance and then let it sink back to the bottom. I kept up this procedure until the lure was well up on the bar.

After the third cast I hooked and landed a bass smaller than the ones I'd caught earlier. Subsequent casts produced nothing. I pulled up the anchor and went back to my crappie fishing. I had found the answers to all the questions I had in my mind.

If you had considered the three questions as I did originally, you have the answer to question 3, but probably not fully to questions 1 and 2. Let's see if we can clear these two up also. **Figure 3** is the same top view of the situation, but here I have added some 5-foot contour lines. My trolled lures showed me the approximate shape and depth of the sections.

If I had a depth sounder, I would still have done the trolling. Lures that are trolled properly will give a more detailed picture of the shape, depths, and the condition of the bottom than a depth sounder. **But more importantly, the lures on the troll would have me "fishing" all the time.** Furthermore, if I had used a depth sounder as an aid in determining what bottom features were present, the speed of the boat would have to be rather fast anyway to get a good picture of the changes in the bottom. If the boat is moving

slowly, such as with a paddle or an electric motor, a *depth sounder is not likely to allow a true interpretation of the bottom features* (structure, breaks, breaklines, deep water). Much too often the fisherman doesn't realize these things and will pass up trolling. Trolling is still an outstanding "teacher."

The structure fisherman goes on the assumption that the fish spend the greater part of their time somewhere in the deepest water in the area being fished. Periodically, they (fish) become active and *may* move toward

the shallows. When they move shallower, they proceed (toward the shallows) on "structure" (a feature of the bottom) they can quickly see and follow).

The most common structure is a "bar" extending out from the shoreline which reaches all the way to the deep water. As the fish move, they will pause or stop at things in or on the bottom which are called "breaks" and "breaklines." How far they go and how long they stay is controlled by the weather and water conditions at that time.

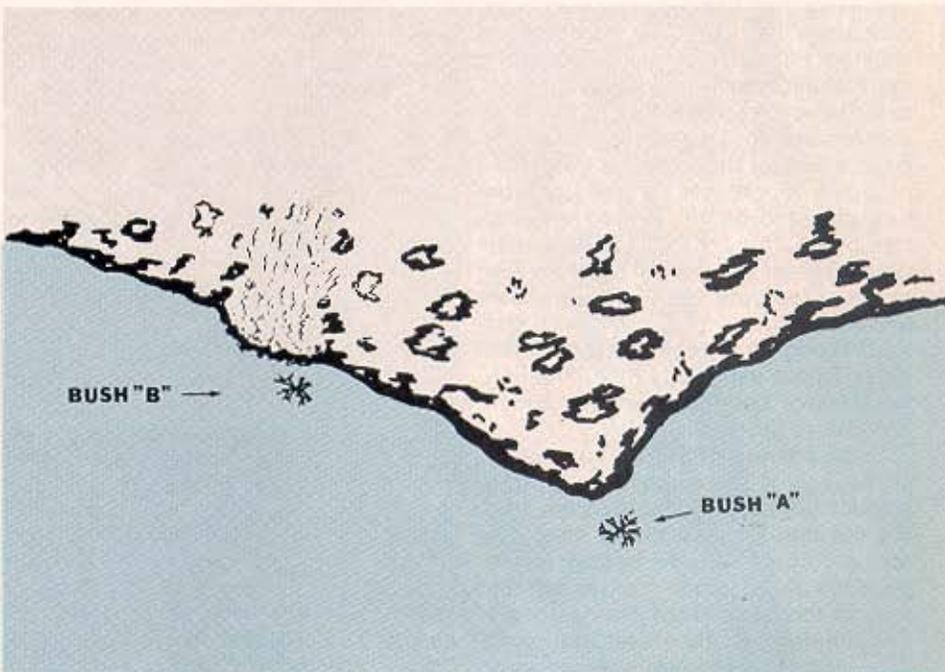


FIGURE 5 - After reading the accompanying article, how would you go about fishing this area? Would you restrict your casting (only) to the two bushes (stick-ups) shown?

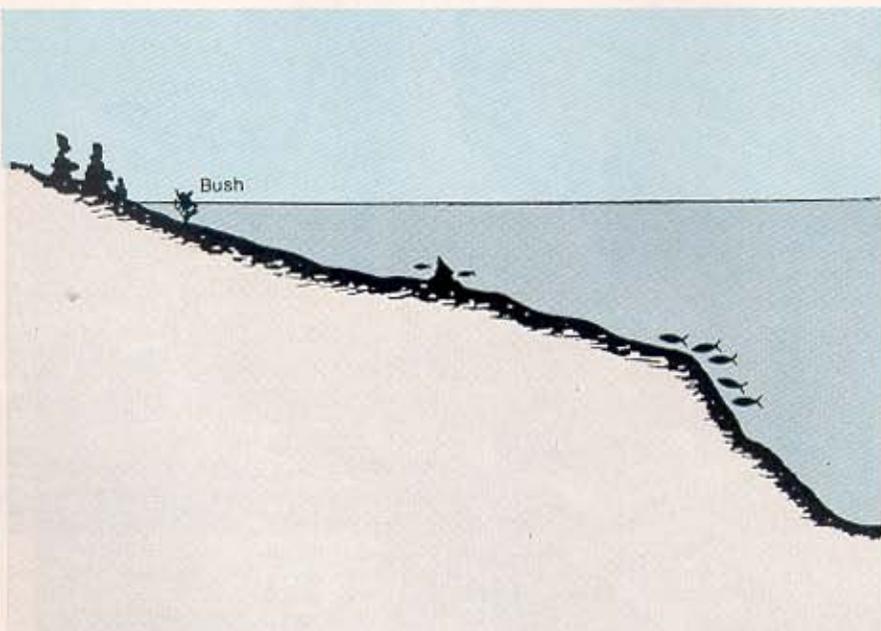


FIGURE 4 - A side view of the actual situation. Note location of the bush (stick-up) in the shallows near shore.

Figure 4 is a side view of the situation. In this figure several things have been added. A stump (a "break") and two small fish have been placed around the 10-foot depth. (That stump is what I got hung up on.) And several large fish have been placed at the end of the bar.

From this view it is apparent the fish have become active and are now moving toward the shallows. From what I observed of the first three fishermen, I would say there were no fish at the bush when they worked it. By the time the fourth fisherman arrived, one of the smaller fish had moved up to the bush. The weather and water conditions were not good enough at that time to get a shallower movement of more or bigger fish. When large fish move to the end of a bar such as this, any smaller fish present would scoot to a more shallow position where they would be safe — **most all the time.**

As far as I was concerned, I had

caught all the fish possible at that time. My past experience had told me any fish I didn't catch had dropped back into deeper water, and/or had become so nonchasing I probably couldn't catch them anyway. From the time the fourth fisherman left the area, until I got to the end of the bar, quite a period of time had elapsed. In fact, I was pretty lucky the fish had stayed up and active that long.

Let's look at a similar situation.

Figure 5 is a top view of a section of a shoreline in a Lowland type reservoir. Two bushes are shown. One is lo-

cated off a shoreline "point," the other off a "wash" (cave-in — slide).

Before you arrived at this portion of the lake, you had observed fishermen in several boats working the bush (A) off the point. As far as you could see, they all took off after casting the bush for a few minutes. At no time did you see a fish caught.

Since you were headed in that direction, you figured you might as well try the bush (A). After using several "killer" lures (and not getting a strike), you move down the shoreline. When you get to the second bush (B),

bush B is in a different situation. The wash has produced a ridgelike "bar" (structure) that extends to the channel. In this instance the fish can pick up the bar immediately (bar goes all the way to deep water) and move toward the bush. Here again, not many fish had moved as shallow as bush B.

If I had been in your place, I would have immediately checked out the deeper water after catching the two fish around bush B.

I would have two choices as to how I would go about it. I could either go to the troll (as I did in the first situation) or I could position my boat for "fancasting" (different casts in an arc) the deeper section of the bar. I would probably do the casting first. By fancasting I would be able to cover as much of the bar as possible in the shortest period of time.

I would use two style lures to check out the speeds. The free-running and bottom-bumping lure for the fast speeds, and a "jump-type" (jig, soft plastic, etc.) for the slower speed.

If I failed to locate additional fish, I'd go to the troll and get a true picture of the bottom features in deep water. Most likely I would also find out why my casts did not produce.

My thoughts and "guidelines" in the fishing situations discussed are:

- (1) Fish spend the greater part of their time in deep water—a sanctuary from a changing environment (when deep water is available to them). And they are usually so deep, or so dormant, they are almost impossible to catch.
- (2) Fish are not active and moving ALL the time. Therefore I must exercise patience quite often for the fish to become active and move shallower.
- (3) When the fish move shallower, they follow bottom features (structure, breaks or breaklines) to show them the way. I can also recognize the same features the fish use in their movements and migrations.
- (4) How far the fish move toward the shallows and how long they stay is controlled by weather and water conditions (at that time). And I have found the weather and water conditions are seldom good enough for all the fish, and especially the larger ones, to move shallow enough for the shoreline fisherman to make a decent catch consistently.
- (5) To handle the different fishing situations faced, I must control the depth and speed of my lures (or bait) on or around the bottom features (structure, breaks, breaklines) the fish use in their movements and migrations. To handle all the situations, trolling is the "teacher" and is just as important as casting—and in some instances may be the only way to put the fish on the stringer.

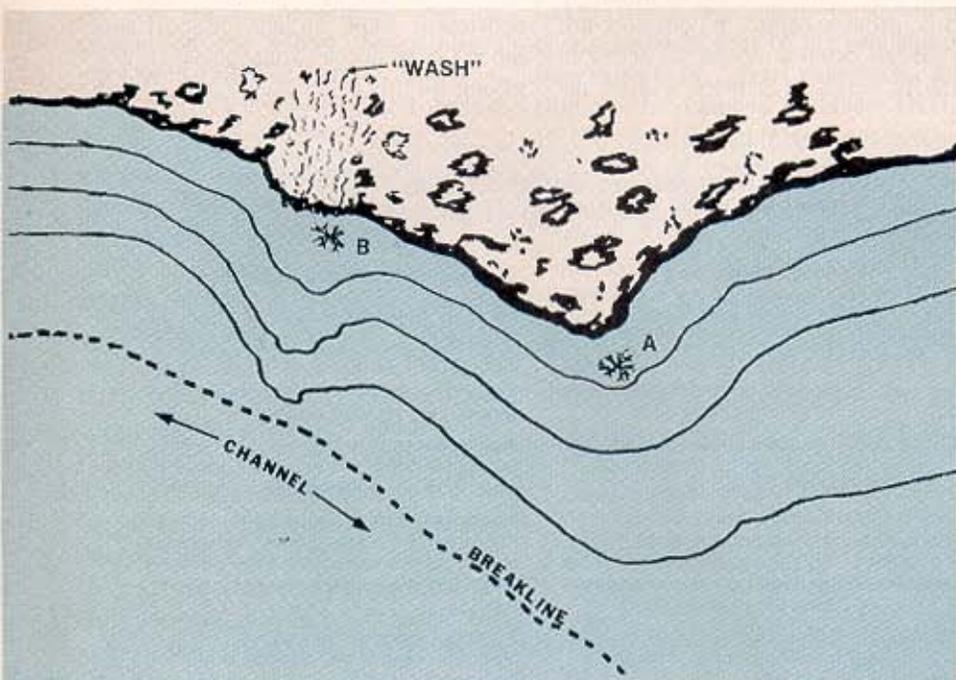


FIGURE 6 - A mental picture of the underwater features as visualized by the author. Note how the "wash" (along shore) has produced a ridgelike bar that extends to the channel. Here the fish can pick up the bar immediately in deep water, and move toward the bush.

"He sure socked that lure, by cracky!"



the first cast produces a "keeper." Subsequent casts produce one more. After several unproductive casts, you move on down the shoreline.

The questions in my mind are:

- (1) Did it ever enter your mind as to why the bush on the point didn't produce and the one on the wash did?
- (2) Why didn't you spend a little time trying to find out why one produced and the other one didn't?
- (3) I wonder if you could add something to the figure that would explain the situation?

Figure 6 is a mental picture that I have of the situation. The bush (A) off the point is located on a gently-sloping flat bottom. There is no "structure," "breaks," or "breaklines" tying this bush to the deepest water in the area (channel). The fish would never know bush A was present. However,