

Early Fall Bass on Lake Keowee

- Bill Walker, Tournament Director of the Keowee Anglers

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As I write this, the Lake Keowee Fall surface temperature transition is about to start. Through September and October, the water temperature will be dropping down from its late summer highs halfway to its midwinter lows. As the shallow water cools down and holds more oxygen, the larger bass will spend more time in the shallows feeding up for the winter. And we will again be able to catch them there.

I live in the vicinity of Mile Creek Park and have recorded surface water temperature measurements at my dock for the last 16 years. The annual temperature cycle is well defined as shown in the attached chart. The summer water temperature at my dock usually peaks in mid-August around 88°F to 90°F. High-temperature water holds very little oxygen and drives the bass deep into the cooler, more oxygen-rich water where they are harder to find and catch. This is especially true for the larger, more mature bass which appear more sensitive to light levels and oxygen content. However, bass still have to eat, so they tend to make forays into the shallows when the water there is the coolest, just before the sun rises. This is why in many parts of Lake Keowee the big bass have been harder to catch for the last 6 weeks, except at the crack of dawn in those shallows that are only a short run from deep water.

Today, the morning surface water temperature near Mile Creek Park was 86°F. According to my charts covering the last 15 years, the water temperature starts dropping linearly around the first week of September. By the first of October it's 82°F +/- 2°F. By the first of November it reaches 73°F +/- 3°F. And by Christmas it starts to level off around 60°F. Then it drops slowly to a low in January and February of about 56°F. Near the "hot hole" where the power plant cooling water comes into the lake from Duke Energy just north of the 130/183 bridge, the water remains 5-10°F warmer through the winter generating a lot of local, early morning fog and in winter making the fish there more active than in other parts of the lake. And south of the 130/183 bridge the water temperature in the south end of the lake will gradually become about 5°F to 10°F colder than at Mile Creek Park and remain that way for most of the winter as the general lake temperature falls.

So, what does all this mean for fishing now?

September is a month of early transition from the summer pattern described above to the fall pattern. As the lake water temperature drops into 70s during the fall, the cooler temperature allows the shallow water to hold more oxygen and the bigger bass tend to spend more time in the shallows looking for food. Early mornings, and further into the Fall late evenings, are the lowest light times and the best fishing times in which to work the shallow points with surface lures and shallow-running soft baits and crank baits. At the crack of dawn and last evening light, fish feed in 2 to 10 feet of water. Later in the mornings and earlier in the evenings fishing is more productive in the approaches to those shallows in 10 to 20 feet of water with deeper running lures like X-raps, Rattletraps, diving crank baits, weighted flukes, and Carolina-rigged or Ned-rigged worms.

Also, as the lake water cools, the bass tend to fatten up for the winter by preying on balls of bait fish that start in the cool depths of the main lake and migrate further up

into the creeks and bays. In late September and October look for those bait balls on your electronics. When you find them, try dropping a jigging spoon below or around them to entice bass following the school to attack your lure.

Deeper into the fall, especially on calm sunny days in October and November, look in the channels of the longer creeks for multiple fish jumps with minnows jumping clear of the water to escape surface-thrashing bass chasing schooling minnows. The spotted bass in particular will be chasing schools of baitfish. Casting a minnow-shaped jig or top-water lure into that surface action can be quite productive. Of course, you have to find a way to sneak close enough to reach the action with a long cast!

If you only see a single fish jump here and there, and no minnows jumping clear of the water, don't get too excited. Those jumps are probably carp.

As the water gets even colder (60s and high 50s) further into the winter, the evenings after a warming sunny day should be better than the cold early mornings, not only for shallow-water fish activity but also for angler comfort! During a winter day, your best bet for winter fishing is going to the bottom with a drop-shot plastic minnow or jigging spoon in 70-80 feet of water where creek channels open to the main lake. But winter is still a long way off, much as some of us are ready to beat the heat now!

For now, if you've been discouraged by the poor fishing in August it's time to try again in the main lake shallows around the crack of dawn and start using your electronics to locate deeper schools of fish that might strike a jigging spoon!

Annual Lake Keowee Water Surface Temperature near Mile Creek Park

