

Catching Winter Bass on Lake Keowee

By Bill Walker, Tournament Director of the Keowee Anglers

Lake Keowee, January 7, 2019

Winter is a difficult time to find and catch bass on Lake Keowee.

By early January the surface water temperature in most of Lake Keowee is usually less than 60°F where it will stay for the winter months. The exception is the area of the lake near the “hot hole”, the small bay where water warmed by cooling the nuclear generators is discharged into the lake. The farther you go from the hot hole, the less noticeable this warming effect is. However, even as far north as Mile Creek Park where I live, the coldest surface temperature I have recorded over the last 15 winters is 55°F, while in the more remote areas of the lake I’ve seen winter temperatures as much as 10 degrees colder.

In winter in the vicinity of the hot hole bass tend remain more active than in other parts of Lake Keowee thanks to the warmer water. So one approach to catching winter bass is to go to the hot hole and use your normal autumn techniques of casting, trolling, or suspending live minnows in that small area. Years ago a national ladies bass tournament was held on Lake Keowee in early February, and the winner used this strategy: each day she would fish the hot hole until she caught her limit of 5 legal bass, then she would move to other parts of the lake to try to catch bigger bass. She was the only tournament contestant who caught 5 bass every day of the tournament!

Of course, if all you readers follow this advice, the hot hole will become crowded and over fished in no time. And, depending on where you dock your boat, it may not be convenient to boat a long distance just to fish in that one small area. Or, maybe you’re like me and simply don’t like the ambiance of the hot hole and prefer to fish in more beautiful, less crowded surroundings.

So where else can I find and catch bass?

In the rest of the lake, the farther the surface water temperature drops below 60°F, the more the bass become relatively inactive and head for the bottom. You have to look for them near the bottom in deep holes or creek channels. Take a lake map that shows the bottom contours of the lake and locate the deep parts of the main lake near you. Look for deep, narrow, well-defined channels that go from the main lake river channel into shallower bay areas. Those deep, narrow channels, and any sharply rising ridges at the mouths of those channels are good places to look for bass. Of course the map shows lots of those channels all around the lake. So, which ones?

Use your electronic depth/fish finder to answer that question. On a calm, sunny day go out and look into those channels with your depth/fish finder. Start either at the main lake end or at the shallow end and cruise along the deepest parts of those channels looking for any indication of fish near the bottom. If you see some indications, note the depth of the water and figure that could be the depth to which the fish have come for your current local weather and water conditions. Some anglers in winter spend a lot of time just cruising and looking for fish near the bottom!

In winter many fish may be lying right on the bottom. They may not show up on your electronics. I have caught bass that I did not see on my depth/fish finder, and some of those had clay on their bellies because they were nestled down against the clay bottom where my electronics couldn’t identify them. If you see just one, there may well be more! Or, if you don’t

see any all along the channel, you may want to slowly drag bait all along the bottom of the channel to see whether one you don't see will bite. If/when you catch one, quickly check the depth and figure that could be the depth to which the fish have come for your local weather and water conditions.

If you find them in one channel, nearby channels might also have fish around the same depth. Usually, in January and early February, I find and catch bass in depths around 70-80 feet! Around late February as the water starts warming a little, they move shallower to 40-60 feet toward their spring spawning areas.

You've got to be kidding, 70-80 feet deep!/? How do you catch them way down there?

Some anglers use a jigging spoon quite effectively. They drop it all the way to the bottom. Then tighten their line and begin jigging, repeatedly raising and lowering their rod so the lure swims up off the bottom a few feet and then settles back. Often, if a strike comes, it comes while the lure is settling back to the bottom. Personally, I've been using this technique more and more with some success.

Other anglers use a drop-shot rig. Take a medium rod and reel with braided line and several feet of clear leader on the end. At the line end of the leader you may attach a swivel. In the middle of the leader tie a size 2/0, finesse or stand-off hook so that the hook sticks straight out from the line with the hook facing up toward the reel. If you Google "drop shot knot" you can find several ways to tie these hooks so that they stand out horizontally from the line. (They also sell drop-shot hooks on swivels to which you attach some leader on each end of the swivel and the hook stands straight out.) Then attach a ½ oz. weight to the leader about a foot and a half below the hook. Any style of weight will do, but they do make special drop-shot sinkers for quick and easy attaching and depth adjusting.

As bait, some anglers lip-hook live minnows with good results. Before I developed my jigging technique, I used small, soft, artificial bait, either a small plastic worm or grub or a small minnow look-alike, I didn't want to be bothered keeping bait alive. I'd push the drop-shot hook in through the front of the bait and curve it around and back out the top so a lot of the hook is exposed. When a fish sucks in the bait, the drop-shot line tends to stop the bait from going deep into the fish's mouth, and typically the fish gets hooked only in the fleshy upper lip.

After you make one of these rigs, lower your drop shot weight all the way to the bottom at selected places, and jiggle the line around with a little up and down movement to make the lure act like it's alive. So now you see why I specified a calm sunny day. The sun will tend to push the light-sensitive fish closer to the bottom where I put my drop shot lure. And any kind of a breeze makes it extremely difficult to keep a boat moving slowly enough to keep a drop-shot rig on the bottom in 70-80 feet of water!

Of course, if you happen to see with your electronics fish that are suspended up off the bottom under your boat, you only have to lower your drop-shot lure to the depth where the fish are. To prepare to do this well, you should lower your bait to the bottom, read the depth of the water on your electronics, then count the number of turns you use to crank your lure to the water surface. From that information you can calculate, the number of cranks per foot for the reel you are using, and then use that information to unwind or wind up your lure to the depth of the suspended fish. Another way to lower your lure to the depth of the fish is to start with your lure at the surface and pull the line off the reel, 1 foot at a time, and counting the feet as you lower the lure.

With the drop-shot technique you often don't feel much of a strike. If the line suddenly gets heavy when you lift it off the bottom, or doesn't sink when you try to lower it deeper, you

probably have a fish on your line. With a drop-shot rig you should not jerk to “set” the hook. Drop-shot hooks are very sharp and thin. Just the tension of starting to pull in the fish will secure the hook into the fish’s lip. The eye-crossing hook-set you appropriately use with other lures is likely to simply pull a drop-shot hook out of a fish’s lip. When I started using a drop-shot rig, I lost what felt like some nice fish simply because my drag was set too tight and the hook pulled out of the lip while I was pulling in the fish. So now, with a drop-shot rig, I set my reel’s drag lighter than usual and try to pull the fish in gradually keeping the line tight, but not pulling too hard.

Once you get the fish to the surface, net it into the boat. If you try to use the line to pull it in over the side of the boat, again you might rip the hook out of the fish’s lip and lose it. Once the fish is in the boat, if you aren’t going to keep it, unhook it quickly and return it to the water so that it can go back deep quickly. Fish brought up from the deep and kept for too long often develop bloated air bladders that push on their internal organs pressing the life out of the fish as they float belly up. If you don’t get one back into the water fast enough and it starts floating belly up with bloated belly, then to allow it to live you probably need to net it again quickly and “fizz” it.

Basically, fizzing a bass releases the built-up air pressure from its air bladder and returns it’s body systems to normal circulation. Google “fizzing bass” to find out about techniques and tools for fizzing a bass. I prefer the technique of going in through the side with a fizzing tool to release the built up air pressure. To find out more about such tools, where to buy them, and how to use them, Google “bass fizzing tool”. If you plan to do deep-water fishing for bass, I recommend get yourself a fizzing tool and learn how to fizz a bass so that you can protect the fishery in Lake Keowee by allowing the bass you don’t want to continue to live.

But only fizz the bass when you’ve tried other things first. First remove the hook quickly and get the fish back into the lake. If it can’t dive down on its own, then net it and try closing its mouth and a slowly moving it back and forth in the water to aerate its gills. If that doesn’t work in about a minute, then try the fizzing tool as a last resort.

One more thing: neither jigging nor using a drop-shot rig is a magic solution guaranteed to catch bass. It takes skill and patience to look around and find the fish plus time and dedication to catch them. Take time to learn from your experiences. Another reason for going out on a calm, sunny day in the winter is to at least have a pleasant time on the lake without freezing to death while you sit there jigging your bait! It also helps to remember one of my father’s wise fishing sayings: “He who goes fishing and complains that he didn’t catch any fish forgot why he went!”



Winter Sunset over Caney Creek, Lake Keowee – Photo Courtesy of Bill Walker