

Are You Ready for Spring Bass?

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Spring is upon us and the buds are swelling. The water temperatures in Lake Keowee will soon be rising and the bass will be starting their approach to their spawning beds. Will you be ready?

The attached figure shows my data for the annual water surface temperature around Mile Creek Park for the last 16 years. In March the data shows a lot of variation, but by the beginning of April the temperature is definitely rising toward its summer high. In the south end of the lake, the Spring water temperatures tend to be 5 to 10 degrees colder than shown on the chart.

By the time you read this, the bass will be starting their annual move toward the shallow spring spawning areas. To find the bass in March and April, you'll have to figure out where they're likely to spawn and then figure out where to drop back a little to intercept them as they migrate there from their winter depths.

When do they spawn? In Lake Keowee largemouth bass tend to spawn between late March and end of April where the water temp is 55°F to 65°F, while spotted bass tend to spawn from mid-April to mid-June where the water temperature is at least 65°F. Because Lake Keowee is so large and has temperature variation throughout its length, the spawn happens at different times in different parts of the lake. I have caught and cleaned spotted bass and found filled egg sacks inside them as late as the second week in June.

Around Mile Creek Park, if the historical pattern repeats this year, I expect the water temp to reach 70°F near the end of April. But the area from Mile Creek Park south to the route 183/130 bridge has higher temperatures than other parts of the lake due to the warm-water discharge from the Duke Energy nuclear power plant. In the early spring the north and south ends of the lake can have water 5°F to 10°F colder than the area south of Mile Creek Park. So you will need to check out the water temperature in the area you plan to fish.

Where do they spawn? Largemouth bass tend to spawn in shallows with some cover and water depths of 1 to 5 feet. Because their spawning beds are so shallow, they prefer sheltered bay areas protected from wind and wave action, but with direct access to the sun's rays to warm the water. They also prefer areas with a firm bottom. (In my opinion largemouth bass are endangered in Lake Keowee, so if you happen to find a spawning largemouth, I urge you to leave the bass and its nest undisturbed to encourage the maintenance of the species in this lake.)

Spotted bass are more flexible in their choice of spawning areas. In addition to the locations where largemouth spawn, spots spawn on firm rocky bottoms as deep as 20ft. Consequently, their nests are much harder to find. The increased depth also makes their nests less vulnerable to wind and wave action. So spotted bass also spawn on more exposed large shallow rocky points and flats on the main lake or in large bays.

Where do I intercept the bass as they move toward their spawning beds? During January and February Lake Keowee bass have been wintering generally in the main creek channels on the bottom as deep 60 to 95 feet of water. They have taken occasional forays into the shallower water for food on days when the sun has warmed the water a little.

Now they will be moving up the creek channels or, in the case of some spotted bass, getting shallower around the main lake flats and points where they plan to spawn. And during their travels, on sunny days they will venture into the sun-warmed shallows looking for food. So, to intercept them, you have to figure out how far they have come along their migration path.

Unfortunately, I know no perfect formula for figuring this out. The nearer the end of April comes, the closer you can figure they are to their spawning grounds. The nearer the local water temperature gets to the 65°F to 70°F range, the closer they are to their spawning ground. The rest is up to you. You have to work your way along the creek channels. Look for signs of fish on your electronics. Probe different depths with your drop shot rigs and jigging spoons. Try the sunny shores and docks along the way with plastic worms and crank baits, to see where you catch them.

Once you find bass, then you can guess that in similar nearby locations in the lake they'll be at about the same depth. And, as spring approaches and the water warms, they'll continue moving on in their migration to their spawning areas.

So, the first step is learning your area of the lake and identifying the likely spawning areas. If you've fished this lake for a year or two, you've probably already located the likely spawning structures in your part of the lake. Then check the local water temp, and the calendar, and work your way along the likely migration routes from the deep water where the bass winter to the spawning places you've identified. When you find the bass, remember their location and the next time you go out you should be able to extrapolate their movements from the last place you found them.

But is your fishing gear ready?

When you read this, if you haven't already prepared your fishing gear for the Spring season, now's the time to get your gear into top shape so you won't lose a bass first time out due to breaking line or a bad hook set.

First take a look at your fishing reels. Spin them to make sure they spin freely. You may want to add a touch of reel oil to the moving parts. If you've saved the user's manual for your reel, it should tell you where to add the oil.

Next look carefully at your line. As you dream of your first Spring bass, run the line between your fingers to see whether it is nicked or frayed. Do you really trust that line to hold your first big Spring bass? Next, take the last few feet of line in both hands with all your knots between your hands, and being careful to hold it so it won't cut you, yank on those knots with all your might to see whether anything snaps. If your line snaps, think about putting new line on your reel. If you're using monofilament line, you may want to replace it every year, and more often if you store it somewhere that sunlight can get to it. Sunlight, even reflected sunlight reaching a rod hung under the roof of a pontoon boat, can degrade and weaken monofilament line.

When I replace my monofilament line on my bait casting reels, I use Spiderwire Super Mono, 12-lb.-test, clear line. It's strong enough for Lake Keowee bass, yet extra thin so that it casts well. The problem with it is that it's so thin that the teeth of spotted bass abrade the line. If I have it next to my lure, I know it will break on the 4th or 5th spotted bass. So with that line I use a 2 ft. leader of Berkley Vanish, 12-lb.-test, clear fluorocarbon that I attach to my mono using a barrel swivel. I then attach my lures to the

fluorocarbon line. The fluorocarbon line is tougher, and the teeth of spotted bass don't abrade that line nearly as much.

On open face spinning reels where I use braided line, I don't replace the line nearly as often. But each Spring I do cut off about 8 ft. of line to remove the most used and most frayed segment. Then using a barrel swivel as a connector, put on a new fluorocarbon leader here too.

When tying knots to barrel swivels, clips, and lures, I always use the Palomar Knot. If you want to learn to tie knots, I recommend you go to www.animatedknots.com. That site has all kinds of knots for almost every business or sport. There you can find step-by-step pictures for tying each knot along with an animation video you can speed up or slow down showing how the knot comes together. To find how to tie the Palomar Knot, click on the Fishing icon and then on the picture labeled Palomar Knot.

Once you have your reels, line, and leaders ready, the last maintenance step is to examine your lures. You may want to clean them up a bit so they look more fresh and natural. If they need cleaning, clean them first, before you sharpen the hooks! The last step is to rub along each hook, along the shank out toward the point, a whetstone or fine file to touch up the point of each hook so your hooks are nice and sharp for sinking easily into the fish to give you a good hook set.

All this maintenance is a great rainy day activity, and right now, as I write this, we're having plenty of rain!

It's hard enough to hook a bass in the clear waters of Lake Keowee. Once you hook one, you don't want to lose it through some failure in your gear! So be sure you've done your maintenance. Then you can go out and enjoy fishing without worrying about the condition of your gear!

Annual Lake Keowee Water Surface Temperature near Mile Creek Park

