

Crack-of-Dawn Spring Bass on Lake Keowee

-Bill Walker, Tournament Co-Director, Keowee Anglers

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May and June is my favorite season to fish for bass on Lake Keowee. At this time the bass are active in the shallows at dawn and will take a top-water lure. For me, there is no greater bass fishing treat than to have a big bass rise to take a top-water lure in the peaceful dawn with a beautiful sunrise in the background!

The spawning season is mostly over, but not quite. I have caught spotted bass on Lake Keowee still fat with eggs as late as the second week in June. A bass won't eat for a week or two just after spawning. That way they don't eat their young, and the species survives! However, they don't all spawn at the same time. And they are hungry before they spawn and after they break their post-spawn fast.

My favorite way to catch bass this time of year is to start fishing at the crack of dawn. By the crack of dawn I mean the time when the stars are still visible and yet the first hint of light is starting to show through the blackness along the Eastern horizon. Then, while I'm fishing, I see the dawn develop and often witness spectacular sunrise displays. It's a cool, peaceful, invigorating time to be out on the lake.

Once I'm in my boat, I sneak up on the main lake points that have wide expanses of shallows right next to drop-offs to much deeper water. Since Keowee is a clear-water lake, the fish can see you coming a long way off, so it's important to stop your main engine at least 50-75 yards away from the place you want to fish and approach quietly with your trolling motor. If there's a little breeze, be sure to approach from a direction such that the breeze will not push you into the area you want to fish. When you do get a fish on and are concentrating on boating it, you don't want your boat drifting through your fishing area disrupting the other fish that you want to catch next.

When I get to a fishing spot, I try to keep the boat just far enough away from shore that I can't cast far enough to hit the shore. I want to be able to cast right up to the shore, but not past it! The last thing I want to do is stir up a fishing spot by trying to get my lure out of a tree or bush in the dark! In the dark, depth perception for an accurate cast plays tricks on my mind. Keeping my boat farther from shore than I can cast is the best way to avoid trouble!

I generally come prepared with 3 rods, each rigged with a different morning lure. One rod usually has a top-water, walk-the-dog kind of lure, like a Roland Martin DAWG 100, a Zara Spook, or a Sammy. I jerk these lures gently so that they zig-zag along the surface (walking the dog). Chugging or popping lures also work very well.

My second rod generally has a white, Zoom super fluke on a 5/0 extra-wide-gap (EWG) hook. For many years I used unweighted hooks successfully. Lately I have been using hooks with a 1/8 oz. weight around the bend in the hook. I can cast them farther, and when the line is slack they settle down into the depths with a realistic swimming motion! I jerk this lure through the shallows like a wounded minnow with the hook slightly exposed for a better chance of a hook-up.

My third rod generally has a crank bait, one that you cast out and crank back in. When it's mostly dark my crank bait of choice is a white spinner-bait with silver blades, one willow-leaf blade and one Colorado blade. As it gets a little lighter, if I'm fishing in the South half of the lake I switch from the spinner bait to a shad-colored, red-eye shad or

rattletrap. But for me, in the north half of the lake (North of the Route 183/130 bridge), those don't seem to work for some reason, so there I switch to shad-colored X-rap or other jerk bait.

Spotted bass are very aggressive on Lake Keowee. If they are on my point, they will strike one of these lures. So, after sneaking up on the shallow point, I make 4-5 casts with the lure on each rod. And if nothing happens on all three, I figure the bass aren't on this point. Then I quickly leave the point and move on to my next point to take maximum advantage of the limited magic time of dawn light. My Dad often told me I'd have a better chance of catching fish if I fish where the fish are.

If I do catch a fish, I generally stick around a little longer ... as long as the action continues. In the south end of the lake there are several good points where I've sometimes caught 5 -10 bass from the same point. However, in the north end of the lake I've rarely caught more than 2 or 3 on any one point, so I tend move on to another point more quickly if I'm fishing in the North end.

When you do catch a bass, if it's a largemouth, I'd appreciate you're throwing it back, because I'm convinced that largemouth bass are endangered in Lake Keowee. Their numbers appear to be dropping; partly due to the increase in the spotted bass population; partly because their favorite habitat, downed trees along the shoreline, has been replaced by riprap in many areas; and partly because they generally spawn in less than 5 feet of water, and if Duke raises and lowers the water level during their spawn, their procreation is affected. (Spotted bass may spawn as deep as 20 feet and are not as affected by water-level changes.)

On the other hand, if you catch a spotted bass, there's no shortage of those, and they make mighty good eating. Have at it! I generally eat the 14"-16" spotted bass and release the larger spotted bass hoping they will get even bigger

If it's really dark and you have trouble telling the difference, learn to smell the fish. The largemouth bass smell fishier! And taste fishier, too, which to me is a good reason to throw the largemouth back.

These catch-and-release guidelines for largemouth and spotted bass have been accepted by the Keowee Anglers board of directors. I encourage you to follow them as well! In addition, to protect and promote our fishery, I'd appreciate your throwing back any fish that are rare in Lake Keowee: smallmouth bass, white bass, and trout. (Yes, trout! They are quite rare in this lake, but every now and then a Keowee Anglers club member catches one on a bass lure.)

This time of year you may also catch a bass with big red sores on its body! This is not some sickness, nor a reaction to pollution. These red sores, or redding, are what happens when bass create their spawning nests. They beat themselves against the bottom, sacrificing their bodies, to clear the silt and leaves away to make a nest. Given time, the sores will heal. This is just part of their normal life cycle.

One more thought. Since largemouth bass spawn in less than 5 feet, you may happen upon a nest. I'd appreciate your leaving such nests alone to complete their spawning cycle undisturbed. We need all the largemouth bass we can preserve in Lake Keowee!

So, by all means, go to bed early, get up while it's still dark, and try fishing the main-lake shallow points at the crack of dawn! It's my favorite time. Maybe we'll meet out there under a spectacular sunrise!



Sunrise over Crow Creek, Lake Keowee.