

Great Balls of Bait!

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October 28, 2016 Salem SC

If your other fishing techniques aren't working for you right now, try looking for bait balls and fishing around them.

By the time you read this article, the surface water temperature will be passing below 70°F in most places on Lake Keowee. After that, it's likely to continue dropping through November and December toward its winter levels of 45°F - 55°F, depending on where you are on the lake (not counting the "hot hole" area where the water is generally a bit warmer).

As November starts and the water cools, the schools of baitfish, often shaped in balls, are working their way further and further up the creeks, and bass are following eating more every time they get a little hungry. This time of year, if I'm going to fish in the middle of the day when the sun is high, I find it worth my time to cruise the main creek channels that lead into Lake Keowee: Cane Creek, Crooked Creek, Von Hollen Branch, Barkshed Branch, Little River, Kelly Creek, Mile Creek, Crow Creek, Cedar Creek, Eastatoe Creek, and the Jocassee Dam tailrace. I look for big balls of baitfish suspended over or near the channel. I have found these balls ranging in size from 3 ft in diameter to 30 feet in diameter. Sometimes I can even see on my electronics the signatures of bass hovering nearby, biding their time, waiting for a moment of their choosing to attack. But even if I can't identify bass in the neighborhood, they may still be there.

To illustrate this article, I went out this afternoon for 15 minutes in Caney Creek to quickly look for bait balls. Attached to this article are 3 screen photos from my fish/depth finder displaying some of the schools of bait I found. Screen 1 shows a bait ball about 7 feet in diameter. Screen two shows on the left an elongated school about 30 feet long and on the right a small ball about 5 feet in diameter. Screen 3 shows two bait balls, and on the bottom in the lower right 3 interesting irregularities that might be bass on the bottom keeping an eye on the bait.

Once I find balls of baitfish, I try one of three ways to fish for bass around them.

The first thing I try is dropping a solid metal jigging spoon down to the bottom below the mass of baitfish to see if I can catch a bass on the bottom underneath the school. My spoon is colored like a small baitfish. I jerk the spoon up off the bottom about a foot and let it settle back down. Fish often strike while it's fluttering back down. After I've done that a couple of dozen times, if nothing happens, I reel in some line to bring the jigging spoon up to the depth of the bait fish and try jerking it up and down a few more times at that level.

One thing that I found useful to figure out is how much my lure rises for each turn of my reel handle. To figure that out I let my lure drop to the bottom where I can see the depth on my fish finder. Then I count the number of turns it takes to bring my lure all the way to the surface. Finally, I divide the number of turns into the depth of the water to get the number of feet my lure comes up with every turn. When I know this for the reel I'm using, then I can accurately raise the lure off the bottom to the depth of the bait ball. Accuracy is important because I often find myself using this technique in 40 to 60 feet of water, and I really want to be able to put my lure close to the level of the bait balls.

If the jigging spoon doesn't work, the second technique I try, especially when there are many bait balls in the same area, is trolling through that area with a medium or deep diving lipped crankbait that is colored like a shad. And I make sure my lure is far behind the boat, about 100-150 feet, so the fish don't associate the lure with the boat.

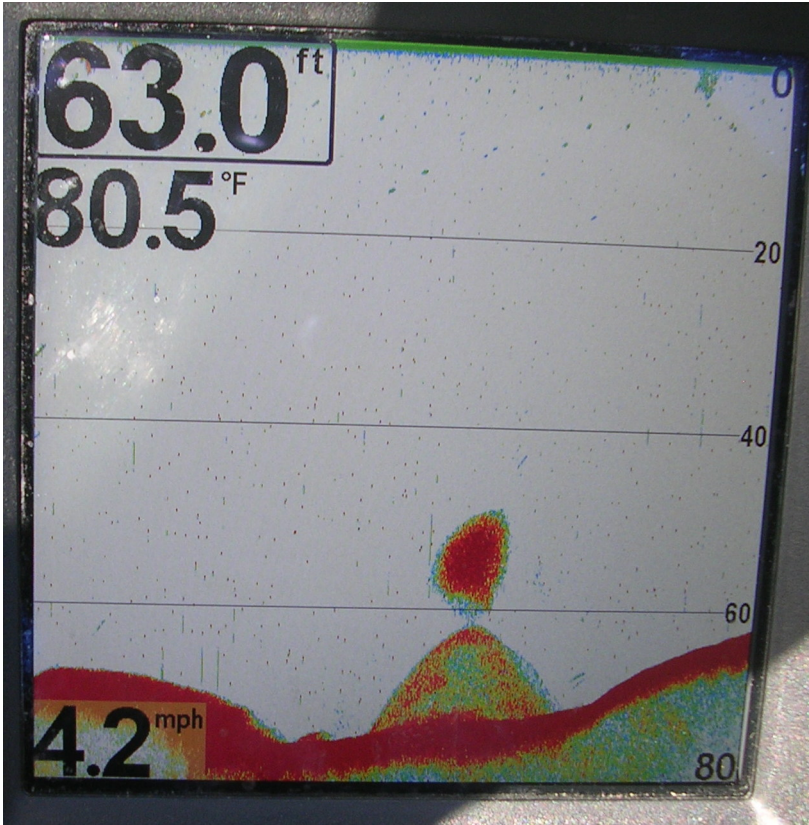
I use a third technique if I'm lucky enough to see a surface feeding frenzy as bass actually attack a ball of baitfish by coming up underneath the school. Bass chase baitfish up to the water surface where baitfish have to make a right-angle turn to stay in the water. When the bait fish turn, the bass cut the corner straight at them, closing in and striking at all the fish nearby and often getting one. Casting a lure into this surface action can often yield a quick strike and a fish on your line. However, casting into this action is often easier said than done. The bass are generally inconsiderate and often start this feeding far from my boat, and by the time I get my boat over there, the bass are gone.

I have a better chance of getting my lure into the action if I have a rod on the side prepared and ready to go with a lure I can cast a long distance. The longer my casting range, the better chance I have that bass will start a feeding frenzy close enough for me to reach them with my lure. I tried casting some lures from my dock to select the few I could cast the longest distance. I found the best lure for this is the same heavy metal jigging spoon that I use for the first technique. The solid metal jigging spoons are quite heavy for their size, and I can cast them a long distance because their small profile has very little wind resistance during the cast.

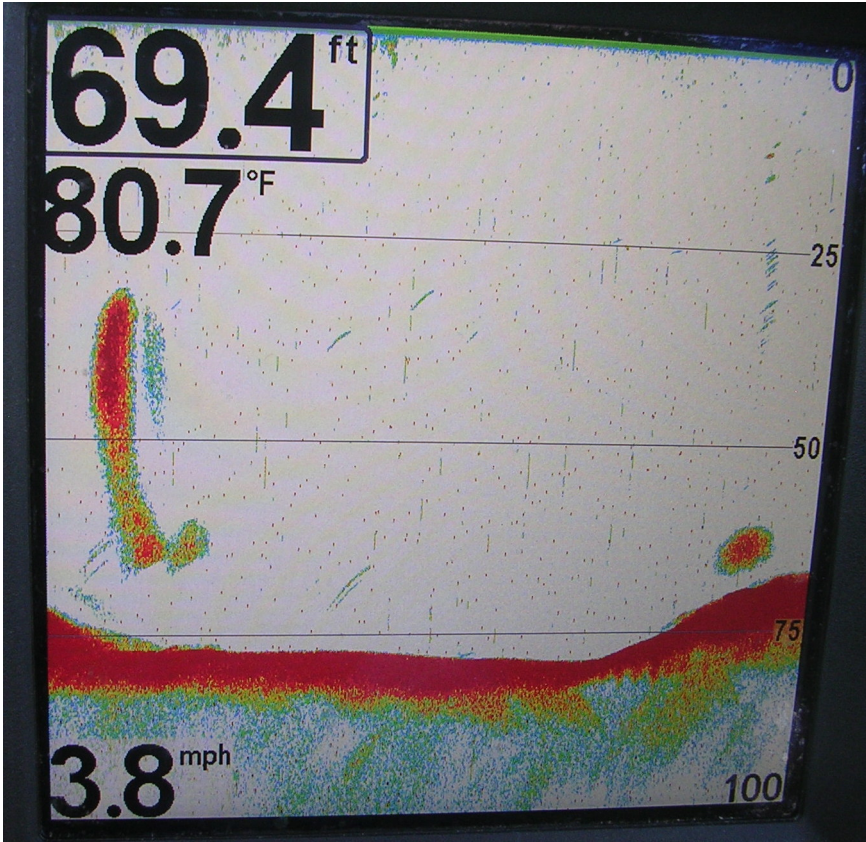
If you take the time to develop these bait-ball techniques for yourself, as well as the patience to use it, you'll have one more weapon in your fishing arsenal! Ah, patience, that is one of the keys. If you try these techniques for the first time, you may have the same experience I had when I started. Since I was learning, I didn't yet have the experience of success with these techniques to give me confidence, so I got bored and discouraged very quickly. At first I felt like giving up when I couldn't find a bait ball. Then sitting on my fishing seat, simply flicking my spoon up off the bottom and letting it settle seemed like it wasn't getting me anywhere. And with my wrist doing everything, flicking the spoon up off the bottom repeatedly and not catching anything right away, my mind was free to wander. I remembered a definition on insanity popularly attributed to Einstein: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. So, to keep myself from going insane, I changed my expectations so that I didn't expect anything different to happen. I set my expectation that I wouldn't get any fish; I'd just get experience raising and lowering the spoon. That made me sane, right!? But then I remembered someone saying that fishing was a jerk on one end of the line waiting for jerk on the other end of the line. As you can imagine, that didn't help my patience any at all!

What finally helped me was going fishing with someone who knew how to work this technique. One day I went out with someone who did have confidence in using jigging spoons around bait balls. AND he knew where to find the bait balls. In four hours we boated 24 bass on our jigging spoons, 14 of which were legal size. Now I have the confidence to be patient enough to make the technique work. If hearing me say this doesn't give you enough confidence to get through the learning curve, then you, too, may need to fish with someone who has confidence in using a jigging spoon around bait balls.

Screen 1. Round ball of bait above something else that might be more bait.



Screen 2. Elongated School of Bait



Screen 3, Two balls of bait and three irregularities on the bottom that might be bass.

