



Fishing with Hank Parker: How to Catch Bass in Cold Water

Here's nothing like a warm February day to get you fired up about the upcoming fishing season. But, many anglers overlook the effect that cold water has on fish. While bass they also are lethargic in cold water, especially in southern regions, and they can be difficult to catch when the surface temp is below 50 degrees. In northern states, bass are more accustomed to the colder climate and can be more aggressive in cold water.

In most parts of the country, that 48- to 52-degree range is when fish become more active. Large bass are among the first to move toward the shallows.

One of the most valuable tools for finding early spring bass is a water temperature gauge. The big fish are really looking for warmer water, so a difference of just a few degrees can really matter. That was evident to me during a tournament on Lake Murray in South Carolina several years ago.

I was fishing my favorite spots on the west side of the lake during practice, and caught a few fish on slow-rolled spinnerbaits. The water temperature was about 49 degrees. During the late afternoon, I switched to the east side and found 54-degree water in the pockets. I caught most of my fish there and finished second in the event.

The reason is simple. The water warmed faster there because it received more direct sun rays through most of the day. Because of the warmer water, they took fast-moving spinnerbaits fished just beneath the surface.

Water clarity matters, too. If there is one proven fact about bass fishing, it's that you should avoid cold, muddy water whenever possible. I always look for the clearest water when fishing during the early season.

Lure choices are somewhat limited in cold water. My favorite is a jig-and-pig anytime the water is below 65 degrees, but a crankbait or spinnerbait can catch them, too. But as I noted earlier, fish are more lethargic this time of year, so you have to slow down.

For crankbaits, I prefer tight wiggling lures such as Mann's Hank's Crank, the Norman Little N or a Rapala Shad Rap. They have a tight quiver during the retrieve, so you get good action from them even when winding them slowly. Wide-wobbling crankbaits require a faster retrieve to produce their action.

Blade and body size on spinnerbaits also is critical in early spring. I often change to a slightly larger blade so I can fish it slower.

I also prefer small-profile baits in cold water. This is a time of year when I use a lot of ¼-ounce jigs and small pork frogs. Smaller baits, including spinnerbaits and crankbaits, often get more strikes.

When searching for cold-water bass, remember that they are usually close to their winter haunts but making moves toward shallow water. They aren't going to be in the backs of coves or far up on the flats, but they may be on rocky points at the mouths of coves or on the edges of shallow flats close to deep water. And, they're going to be very close to baitfish.