

Jigs and Jig Bass Fishing

Written by Dan McGarry • February 2011



As everyone knows that has fished with me, I love jigs!!!! Yes, I think that highly of them, and they have rewarded me with lots of bass over the last 10 years. As bass baits go the jig has replaced the plastic worm as my number one go to bait. Jigs are in a family of lures called jump baits, that is they are baits that are worked up and down in the water column.

However, if you are just working jigs up and down, you will only catch a small percentage of the bass that can be caught with other jig presentations. In this article, I will try to cover the equipment to fish jigs effectively, jig design, presentations, and applications that will give you the confidence to catch more and bigger bass next year.

When it comes to fishing jigs, the first and foremost important tool is the rod. The rods I use all have one thing in common -- a fast taper; this means that the rod has a stiff butt section and a tip that loads up quickly. These rods have what is known as a 20% tip 80% butt. Even ultra light jig presentations require an ultra sensitive rod and not a "flim-flam stik". Whether I am fishing a 1/16 oz marabou jig or an 1 oz jig-n-pork, they all have the same fast taper heavy action. Do not confuse this with a "broom-stik" or a "pool-cue".

It cannot be stressed enough that you need a sensitive, light, fast taper rod for feeling the bait and delivering it to the target zone, using a wimpy rod is like pushing a truck up a hill using a rope. For light jig presentations I use a 5'3" Boron X Fenwick spinning rod with a 1300 Daiwa spinning reel and 4# to 6# Berkley Vanish line. This rod is unavailable because it is 15 years old; however, the CastAway MLS60 Mag lite or LS60 will work great. I just bought the MLS60 and cut 3" off the tip and it has the same great fast action and excellent feel to cast light tubes and marabou jigs as my old reliable Boron X Fenwick. Combine this with a Daiwa Emblem X200iA and you have a solid light jig rod for years to come. My work horse jig rods for spinning tackle is the original Team Daiwa "Tony Bean" smallmouth rod with a 1300 Daiwa spinning reel. I use Bagleys silver thread in 6#, 8#, and 10# test to do my hair jigs and grubs, tubes or Wacky worms. This rod is my workhorse and that is why I own four of them. My traditional jig-n-pig rod is up until this year been a 6'6" AllStar viper rod heavy action with a Quantum EX501 casting reel and a AllStar WR1 worm rod with the same reel. On these rods I use 40# or

50# Spider wire. A moment ago, I mentioned that up until this year, these were the rods I have been using. I would be remiss in not telling you about the best jig-n-pig rod I have ever seen or used and I owe it all to Steve at Northern Bass supply (it pays to go to a real catalogue where you can talk to a good jig fisherman on the phone and not someone paid to read you the specials and take orders). I was looking for two new jig rods and I was going with different ideas and what I like when Steve suggested I try the CastAway JWH610-HG40, which is a heavy action jig rod. Well, I ordered one and I will be ordering a couple more; they are the most sensitive jig rod I have ever felt. To a new jig fisherman they may seem expensive at \$146.00, but they are worth every penny. In fact, I just joined the CastAway mailing list because they make such a quality product and I bought the aforementioned MLS60 spinning rod. These are not shameless plugs as anyone who knows me will tell you; when it comes to top of line equipment, I very rarely think they will make a difference as long as it is good equipment, but this rod will make a good fisherman a better fisherman. As for my new reels I am still deciding so you will have to ask me on the water what I picked; it is between the Quantum Accurist, Daiwa TDS103HVLA, and Shimano 101A Chronarch.

Enough said about equipment. When it comes to jigs pay attention to design and remember as a lawyer once told me, "The beauty lies in the details." As far as hair jigs go, my friend in Sylvan Beach, Bill Alexander, makes the best river jig and lake jigs around. His "Mutant Sand Fleas" and "Sand Fleas" catch fish and big fish. Bill's jigs are made with buck tail and they have quality thin wire hooks. These jigs I fish with a 101 pork frog or bareback depending on the season and on the water temperature. I also use a synthetic tie made by Zorro baits called the "Ninny Fly," this is always used with a 101 pork frog and my favorite colors are black and chartreuse or black and purple. With the "Ninny Fly," attention to detail is critical, if you order these, get 1/8 oz and 1/4 oz and take them out of the package and trim the hair even with the back of the hook starting at the bottom, but sweep the cut up and away from the bottom leaving a curl. If anyone thinks that is not important you are entitled to your opinion but do one and look at it in the water compared to a untrimmed one and you will see the difference in the flare of the skirt. The MTO jigs require zero trimming because they are hand ties and will work out of the package.

Bill's jigs come in any color combo you can think of but I use brown/blue, rust red, black, and my favorite, Hudson River color avocado green. I use these in 1/16 oz, 1/8 oz, 1/4 oz and 3/8 oz (see me at the meeting or contact me to

obtain MTO lure catalogue). The standard jig-n-pigs I use are Stanley 3/16 oz or my favorite casting jig for Long Island, the 1/8 oz black/blue and purple Rat-L-Back jig, both have light wire hooks that penetrate easily and still hold a big fish. I fish these with a Strike King Bo Hawg Sr. or Jr. in black/blue or black/chartreuse. I also use these same two jigs in 1/4 oz to 1 oz in a few basic colors such as black/blue/purple, black/chartreuse, black/green, green pumpkin, and brown/orange/green.

When choosing a jig remember that the eye placement tells you about how a jig will act, as does the head design. Aspirin head jigs offer less resistance and a faster fall rate, but give you some weed problems; however, due to their aerodynamics, they work great in current. Ball heads fall fast but tend to lift more in current and like weeds a little better, but the eye is top dead center which has problems in brush. The Football head offers quick fall and snag resistance in rocks. The standard jig head offers a slower fall and the best of all worlds just by adjusting weight and by checking eye placement; the further down the eye is, the harder it is to get a good hookset and if you don't believe me try some "Weed Sneaks" a great grass jig but a big time fish loser due to a very heavy hook, weed guard, and eye placement. It comes through the weeds and will catch them but you have to be ready to lose some. The Stanley jig comes through the weeds fine because of its eye placement and head design. The Rat-L-Back jig (my favorite) works well in the weeds and in the brush because the eye is turned flat which makes it a little more weedy, but it shuns docks, dock lines, boat covers, and brush. Both have thin wire hooks. Take any of these out of the package and start by thinning the weed guard (note: I said thin not trim). Rich Zaleski wrote on his web page that most of us cut our weed guards off lower than the hook point, he pointed out that the weed guard is actually a fulcrum and it is the simplest thing, yet I missed it until last year. If you leave it long and thin it down from the base, it is far more pliable than short and stiff; so remove with a scissors half the strands. News flash, do not worry about losing jigs or hanging up, **YOU ARE GOING TO LOSE JIGS, LOTS OF THEM!!!** A jig is meant to be played in nasty places so relax buy a good supply, I go through about 100 per year. Next take the jig and trim the skirt even with the hook point, then sharpen the hook until it makes you bleed when you look at it. Install a small piece of power worm on the shank and put the jig in a small craft store zip lock bag labeled. I could go on and on about different jig designs, including the old Hankie Marsh Invader or Gary Klein Weapon jig, but I will let you try them and tell me about them. Keep trying new things and remember, a good idea is where you find it. With equipment covered let's take a look at the presentations used throughout the seasons. Keep in mind our golden rule: Location dictates presentation. As the water thaws out and our cabin fever reaches a fevered pitch, the first rod out should be our little light jig rod with either a

Black Marabou jig in 1/16 oz or 1/8 oz, or the same size MTO jig in Avocado and 4# test line. I fish this rig very slowly and bareback (no trailer) in steeper deep areas or on Long Island inflows with any leftover green weeds. Try to remember "cover" and "deep" are relative terms. Look for rocky and bluffy (Candlewood Lake), or shallow inflow weedy (Forge Pond). Work the bait by casting, feeling the bait settle on a controlled slack line. The difference between a controlled slack line, a free fall, or a tight line means about a foot in water 3' deep or 3' in water 10' deep. This may not seem like a lot but this is a game of inches, ask Tiger Woods if a foot matters.

Control the bait until it is on the bottom and then begin dragging the bait back to the boat in a deliberate slow reel and lift retrieve. Keep the rod between 0930 and 1100 and never get stuck with the rod above 11:00. Feel every piece of muck, every stick, and every nook and cranny in the rocks, brush, or weeds, and fish so slow that it is painful when you think you are going to slow down. This retrieve is known as "polishing the rocks" or the "Canal Crawl;" drag the bait like a little invertebrate that is emerging from a long siesta. Most of the fish you catch this time of year will be hooked in the lower part of their mouths and will not fight as hard as they would in the summer (makes sense cold water > cold bass > slow bass). As the water warms up, or on any cold front days, I like to use the MTO jigs with a small plastic frog or uncle josh 101 pork frog. This jig is very effective for current; if I am fishing a river with a lot of flow I position the boat down stream of my target area and cast beyond the area to be fished I hold the rod at 1000 and reel slowly, shacking the rod tip very lightly. Strikes are line straightening slams.

The Ninny flies are fished in the same manner, but much slower, and I use these in thicker weeds or during the spawn for bedding fish. Due to its very compact size, it is an instant mouthful to bedding bass. In Candlewood Lake my favorite is a 1/4 oz black/purple with a 101 black/chartreuse pork. I fish this in and around rocks and docks throwing at all the sides and corners. During the spring it is very important to set the hook quickly and if you miss, throw right back because the bass that has just ejected your jig off his/her bed will do the same the next time it comes in.

On a number of occasions I have shown partners this in tournaments. I was fishing my jig along the bottom in 12' of water and stop it when the line jumped to the left; I immediately threw back and landed the 2 pound Smallie. Most of the bigger Smallies I have caught during this time of year come from areas 8' to 15' with rocks and straggler or weeds. The best spots are areas where the old, inside weedline and an object meet. This could mean a dock, pontoon boat, or boulder. If I bump something, I get right back to it and probe both sides working away picking each

subtle part of it apart. Try to remember whether you are fishing in 2' or 200', always pay attention to details, look at the bank and line your cast up with an object, that way if you hit something or move past it you can get back to where you were and work out from it. Use the whole system as a blind man would use his cane -- feel and move slowly, if we were blindfolded would we walk or would we run?

In all types of fishing success is in the details. Try to imagine how you would move around if you were the lowest item on the food chain and everything is trying to eat you. I don't think you would arrive and depart with a party horn and hat on. Sorry about the tangent I just went off on, but if you want to know the predator first you must understand the prey. The standard jig-n-pigs I fish in many ways, but I will tell you my three favorites. The best way to catch fish on a jig is object fishing, that is to throw at objects. This type of fishing is known as dock hopping, tree fishing, or shotgun fishing. Heavy line and hard work pay off; you start by fishing in dense cover throwing in and through everything there is. It is easy on the fisherman mentally because you see an object, you throw at it, you catch a bass. This type of fishing is exciting and becomes an all or easy crutch or dead end for a lot of fishermen.

To do this just take a 3/8 oz jig with a Bo Hawg Sr. and star whipping it into everything on the shore -- the thicker, the better. A couple of keys to look for: 1) don't ignore a bare bank with one vine of small bush on it and 2) always look for signs like the big spider's web no one has cast through. Once again, this fishing has to be done slow and deliberately; pick cover apart, especially on Long Island where every fish counts. Put a jig in a nasty spot and leave it there; shake it let it sit, shake it let it sit, swim it out take another shot. When bass are there they will crush it on the first splash or they will need a subtle landing and the old shake in place retrieve. When a bass is in a tight spot and this object come hurtling toward the water and lands splat where nothing has ever landed before their instincts take over and they have no choice but to destroy the visitor. Always set the hook parallel to the water or across your chest than reel hard and run the boat in to get him. I have found that the surest way to drop fish in this situation is to set straight up for 0900 to 1300 good set, but you launch the fish up and out of the element that helps drive the hook in water. Water is the weight around him that helps hold his body (mass) back by creating friction, remember all bass are lighter and smaller out of water and the worst fish to set up on is one headed for the boat. Most jig fisherman star fishing jigs this way and some do it all the time counting on the fact that a shallow fish is a biting fish and some fish are always shallow. Sorry, but I don't like limits when it comes to ways to catch bass.

The next way is the simple method known as slopping. I love the strike on this method because it is like that movie, "Tremors;" you throw your jig on top of matted vegetation and shake it across the top making as much noise as possible, and no I don't mean talking or yelling. Hold the rod at 1000 and shake the tip to create slow vibrations on top of the grass. At times, you will see blow ups all around the jig and then suddenly your jig will disappear and the rod will be pulled from your hand. When this happens, make sure to drop the rod to 0830 and snap upward, and on impact turn the handle three quick turns, then either crank the fish over the top or go and get him. If you hit matted vegetation and the bass are hitting but missing, use a heavier jig and shake it until it punches through the grass. Keep it there then first shake it on the bottom then reel it to within a foot of the surface, leave it there, and shake it again just keep still and wait. I have caught up to five fish out of a spot 10'x10' using this method. Once again, this is exciting and object fishing easy to hook a fisherman and a crutch that can at times hurt you if you stay with it too long.

The third method, and the one that I think says you are on a different plateau, is when you can fish flats with scattered weeds on it. For this method I use a 1/8 oz Rat-L-Back jig casting and slowly retrieving the jig or swimming it through the cover. When I encounter weeds I just shake the jig through it slowly and kind of slow roll the jig back to the boat; it is like fishing a crank bait slow or a jig fast (I hate that word when it comes to jig fishing). At times, I try to make a splash because the bass react better to the bait and will smack it hard, and at other times you will just feel resistance. If you find you are only getting hits right after the cast, just make a pitch reel and shake. If nothing happens, repeat until the bass tell you different.

When fishing this method work slowly and take the time to notice the objects on the bank that you are lined up with; if you have success you will want to go back there. This type of fishing requires discipline because safety net or crutch (objects) is gone. Do not think I don't like objects, but I have stopped having confidence in them and have seen them as they are -- things bass use at times. Fisherman need to feel comfortable; have confidence in yourself and do not settle into a comfortable little, "I know everything," niche. This is the same as guys who don't like night fishing, they refuse to go, and catch themselves by saying that they cannot fish at night. This is caused by their fear of, "I can't see my line," or "I can't fish the bank." Learn to fish at night; it will open up your senses and make your feel of the bass' world come alive. I could write at least another million words on jig fishing, but we have limited space so in closing I hope this helps make you a better fisherman.

See you on the water ...Dan McGarry