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NATURE'S AN INSIDE LOOK AT SHINER FISHING FOR LUNKER BASS WAY

“In the top Florida lakes, at least 90 percent of bass over 10 pounds are caught on wild shiners.” That’s the word from Captain James Jackson, renowned guide on West Lake Tohopekaliga, affectionately known as “Toho” by her fans across the continent.

For vacationing anglers, Florida is the place to go once winter shuts down fishing in the northern and central regions. Central Florida contains scores of excellent largemouth bass fisheries, most worked by knowledgeable guides ready to escort anglers, from novices on a side-trip from Disney World to tournament veterans looking for an edge in an upcoming competition. But the top guides are only ready if you book a trip well in advance of the prime times from late December through March.

Shiner fishing, of course, is far from new. Florida’s earliest anglers, 19th century gents who visited via

railroad, rigged these large and abundant natural baits on steel poles, revolving spool reels, and coarse braided line. Refinements in tackle have occurred, but tactics remain down to earth, as anglers imitate the primordial hunt of the bass for its preferred prey. In the scenario, the angler sets the stage by offering a bait, then watches and feels the reactions of predator and prey to the presentation.

Shiner fishing has remained popular in Florida because it’s so effective. Ten-pounders can be caught on plastic worms or topwaters, but success will be sporadic in comparison. Outside Florida, shiner fishing is a dwindling or even lost art. But wherever you fish for big largemouths (smallmouths too), live shiners can be deadly. Combined with careful hook removal procedures and a selective harvest philosophy, bait fishing does not damage bass fisheries.

BY STEVE QUINN

ABOUT BAIT

In Florida, guides or bait collectors gather wild golden shiners, technically known as *Notemigonus chryssoleucas*. The golden shiner occupies nearly all suitable waters from the Atlantic Coast west through the Dakotas and Texas and as far north as central Manitoba. Because of its wide use as a baitfish, it's unclear where the species is native and where it has been introduced. But it's certainly adaptable, and tasty.

Bass in an aquarium will gulp shiner after shiner while ignoring bluegills, crawfish, and frogs. The only bait more eagerly eaten is the waterdog. "Shiners are the prevalent prey in Toho, with threadfin shad a secondary choice," Jackson says. "In winter, bass eat crawfish, but not during the other seasons. We have plenty of gizzard shad, bluegills, and crappies, but they're not common prey."

Golden shiners are broad-bodied minnows, offering a caloric boost, and they lack spines or other defenses. In productive waters from Massachusetts to Florida, they commonly reach 10 inches and over half a pound, on a diet of zooplankton, insect larvae, small snails, and algae.

Pond-raised shiners are widely available, but experts prefer wild shiners caught locally, as they exhibit a natural fear reaction when a bass approaches, teasing it to strike instead of finning along unaware of danger. They're fun to catch on a light spinning outfit, tiny hook (#10 to #12), and a bit of bread or worm. Commercial collectors prefer cast nets, and in baited areas (they love Quaker Oats), they can corral dozens with a well-placed throw. Not a bad business, as they sell for around \$14 a dozen.

"On an 8-hour guide trip, I plan to go through six dozen," Jackson notes. "It's important to have fresh active bait. They stay lively for three or four casts, then can be discarded. It's one bait per fish, and we often get bites from gar, bowfin, and pickerel."

To keep baits fresh onboard, you need a well aerated, recirculating livewell. Large round tanks with aeration or an oxygen system and fine air stones are better, with additives in the water, particularly in warmer weather. A round tank about 30 inches in diameter and 20 inches deep holds 6 or 8 dozen shiners.

RIGGING

Hooks—Most Florida guides favor wide-gap or Kahle hooks, due to the way they hold a lip-hooked shiner in the bend of the hook, and because their large gap makes for sure hookups. James Jackson prefers a 6/0 model made by Gamakatsu. Matzuo's red shiner hook with patented "sickle design" also is catching on. "I've had

"In the top Florida lakes, at least 90 percent of bass over 10 pounds are caught on wild shiners."



smaller hooks bend out under heavy pressure from a big bass," Jackson says. "With the tackle I use, setting that big hook generally isn't a problem, although I have to set hard and reel fast to get stretch out of monofilament when the fish is a ways off."

"When fishing pockets in hydrilla, we use an open hook (no weedguard) because this hook generally rides above the level of the vegetation, as bass typically feed upward in our lakes. The hook point rides up in the snout of the shiner and only hangs grass when a hooked bass dives into it."

"Around maidencane, however, we fish weedless hooks that I make by soldering a portion of a guitar string around the shank just below the eye. Then I place a piece of heat-shrink tubing over the solder to hide the silver. There's a lot of shiner fishing pressure, and these fish get wise."

Lake Okeechobee guide Glen Hunter occasionally opts for a weighted shiner rig to hold baits near an edge, breakline, or piece of cover. A 2-ounce sinker anchors the rig while a float keeps the rig upright and signals bites. The shiner swims on a tether set at a variable distance between the surface and the bottom.

Rods and Reels—For setting the hook, often at long range, Jackson favors 7- to 8-foot medium-heavy-power and medium-fast-action rods. He advises clients to bring flippin' sticks, as they work well and virtually all bass anglers have one. Some experts have custom rods with somewhat faster tips, more parabolic midsections, and even stouter butts. When In-Fisherman Editor-in-Chief Doug Stange filmed a television segment with Jackson last spring, he fished Shakespeare's 7½-foot Intrepid flippin'



Pear-shape styrofoam floats about 2 inches in height are ideal for shiner fishing.

stick, and it worked admirably. The reels were Pflueger Trion 66s. (This episode airs beginning the weekend of January 23-24, about the time subscribers receive this issue.)

Match with a high-capacity baitcasting reel with a low to moderate gear ratio, which provides greater cranking power. Jackson calls 'em "catfish reels." You want a tough reel with a clicker. Anglers set the hook as soon as the float submerges fully. Reels like the Ambassador 6500 C3, Pflueger Trion 66, Shimano Catala 400, or Shakespeare Catera 4311A work well.

Line—Jackson favors heavy mono, such as Berkley Trilene XT or Big Game in 25- or 30-pound test. "No one fishes less than 25-pound in my boat," he says. "Some anglers and guides fish braids, but in my experience, they don't work well in this situation. I fish with the drag cranked way down, and no-stretch lines and tight drags don't go together.

"First, a powerful hookset with braided line can pull the hook out of the bait and the bass' mouth before it sets. I had fewer hookups when I tried it. Also, when a big bass gets near the boat, it often bolts.

"Pulling hard against a heavy rod and no-stretch line can cause the hook to tear loose. The tissues in the throat will even tear under that pressure, as well as the mouth. Also, a sudden head shake can create slack and allow a fish to spit the hook. Mono keeps steady pressure on a hooked bass, and offers a degree of shock resistance."

Jackson has another trick for fishing mono. He carries a small tub of silicone paste used to make fly-lines float. "If I'm fishing with the wind at my back, I run the mono through a pad coated with the silicone paste, to make it float. It's easier to watch lines, and they stay straight to the bait. If, on the other hand, we are set up to fish cross-wind, I fish mono without the floatant, so it sinks. Wind creates a huge bow in floating line, making it difficult to

set the hook. Paste silicone stays on the line longer than the spray type."

Floats—Most shiner guides favor a Styrofoam float, as they're functional, tough, and cheap. Jackson favors a pear-shape model 2 inches in height. "In shiner fishing, you want your presentation to be as natural as possible, and a larger float causes more drag on the shiner. That's also why I prefer Styrofoam over balloons. If a float is too small, large shiners can pull it under and you won't know when a light-biting bass has taken it.

"Float color is important, in my opinion," he adds. "I've experimented with camouflage, natural cork, and various paint schemes. I always go

back to red-and-white striped floats. Doug Hannon reported the same thing years ago, when he was doing a lot of shiner fishing. Perhaps the white on the float resembles the belly of a baitfish.

"Bass in our shallow Florida lakes feed upward, so you should set the bait slightly above the level of the grass. I never set it more than 30 inches above the bait. When I see surface action or bass start chasing shiners to the surface, I shorten the distance, lengthening it if bass are spitting out baits, or on a slow bite due to a cold front. In those conditions, I also freeline shiners, removing the float and allowing the shiner to swim down into the pockets in the grass where the bass are holding." In those situations, Glen Hunter deploys his weighted rig.

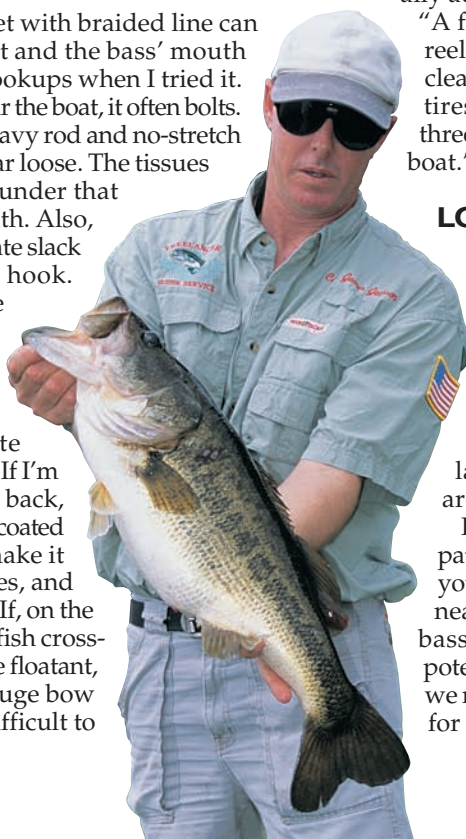
Jackson prefers to set out three float lines, occasionally adding a fourth line with a freelined shiner.

"A fourth float line means that you're always reeling lines back in, as you sometimes want to clear lines when you have a good bass on. That tires out the shiners, so you waste bait. I fish three floats whether I have 1, 2, or 3 clients in the boat."

LOCATION

On Toho, Okeechobee, Stick Marsh, Lake Walk-In-Water, and other great fisheries, nearly all bass action takes place in less than seven feet of water. Florida lakes contain many species of submerged, floating, and emergent plants. They create prime growing conditions for insects and small fish, and a productive ecosystem for largemouth bass. So you're always fishing around weeds.

Pockets and edges tend to hold bass, as do patches of bulrushes or maidencane. And when you find one bass, chances are there are dozens nearby. "If I don't have a big concentration of bass located, I often troll shiners slowly over potential areas. It's a great way to find fish. Then we may anchor up and stay in a productive spot for several hours, catching fish after fish."



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Years ago, I fished shiners over similar areas in the natural lakes of New York and Connecticut. Though my technique was far from the sophisticated systems guides employ, I caught lots of bass and some real sporty ones too.

In Minnesota, shiners aren't fished much for bass, as lure fishing, along with the regional use of live frogs, has been traditional since the 1950s. But North Country guides, who typically seek walleyes, often turn to livebait to load the boat with bass when the 'eyes turn finicky. Fishing shiners or other minnow species on a slipsinker Lindy rig keeps the action hot, when baits are dragged along the outside of the deep weedline in 10 to 18 feet of water. Alternately, impaling a shiner on a ball-head jig is deadly when bass hold among weed clumps or breaks. A head from 1/16 to 1/8 ounce allows a slow descent, and bites often come on the fall.

In other regions, various types of structure and cover can be successfully fished with live shiners or shad. A heavier slip-sinker rig, more like a Carolina rig, is effective when bass hold along deep underwater points, over roadbeds, or on submerged river ledges. If brush and timber are present, a weedless hook helps. If you've never fished for bass with live shiners, you'll be surprised by how eagerly bass eat them while refusing various artificial presentations.

TIMING THE BITE

"Down here, bass bite on a time clock," Jackson says. "The times of moonrise and moonset, known as solunar majors and minors, absolutely create feeding windows for bass. You will find that conditions being equal, a strong bite will begin about 25 minutes before the start of a solunar major. Be sure to be on a prime spot at that time.

Jackson uses his Casio watch to time these periods, setting the local longitude and latitude for the most accurate definition of the solunar times. "Of course, these feeding peaks are particularly strong if they coincide with low-light conditions in the



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morning or evening, or with a falling barometer. Similarly, activity around the solunar periods are somewhat suppressed if they fall around midday.

"In midmorning or afternoon, I can tell you when bass will start feeding. These feeding periods hold all year long, not just around the spawn. I feel that bass living in shallow water, as they do here in Florida, are particularly tuned to lunar periods.

"Full and new moons also affect the bass bite," he says. "The best period of the month is the week preceding the full moon. My regular customers always reserve early to be sure they can fish with me during that time. And again, this moon effect is a year-round phenomenon. The full moon, however, is a two-edged sword.

"The week following the full moon is the poorest time of the month. Bass, shiners, and other fish seem to be stressed and appear in poorer condition. Shiners slough their slime coat after the full moon and are listless. The new moon, on the other hand, has a positive effect on feeding activity that starts before the dark of the moon and lasts sev-