

For many anglers today, the notion of dunking a live minnow, crayfish, or worm for bass is about as appealing as trolling. For some, using livebait seems like the antithesis of power fishing—moving fast to cover great expanses of water. To cash tournament checks, anglers often target groups of bass that run far smaller than solitary lunkers. In that situation, a fast approach with artificial lures is the ticket. Consider that livebait is banned in most tournaments, and over years, a livebait taboo has arisen. But bass couldn't care less about taboos. They eat live food. Particularly for trophy bass, which become wise to the mechanical movements of most lures, livebait excels.

Throughout the early 20th century, and even today, the biggest Florida-strain largemouths in far southeastern waters fall to wild shiners. While other lures come and go, live shiners are eaten by more 6- to 10-pound bass than anything else. Big bass don't become conditioned to them, as they do to artificials. On famed Florida fisheries such as Lake Okeechobee, the St. Johns River, and Stick Marsh, big bass guides continue to rely primarily, if not exclusively, on live shiners.

At the opposite end of North America, California's deep, clear reservoirs are home to the mightiest largemouths swimming today. Many of the heaviest bass taken in recent history have fallen to live crayfish presented patiently along deep rock points in impoundments like Castaic, Casitas, Hodges, Irvine, and Murray. Although swimbait fishing has upstaged other presentations in recent years, live crayfish continue to be a money method for huge, wary bass. Indeed, the second largest bass ever recorded, Bob Crupi's 22.01-pounder, fell for a live crayfish in March 1991. A year earlier, Crupi had boated a 21-pounder, also with a live crayfish. Fifteen years earlier, Dave Zimerlee landed the seventh largest bass ever recorded, a 20.9-pound specimen, while fishing a live nightcrawler in Lake Miramar, California. Throughout the history of In-Fisherman's Master Angler Award Program, many of the biggest bass have fallen to livebaits—mostly live shiners and nightcrawlers. Whatever your perception of livebait, natural critters often remain the finest option for truly large bass.

THE LIVEBAIT EDGE

Big bass can't resist livebait because it's what they eat. Noted trophy bass angler Doug Hannon says, "Big bass get big partly by avoiding food that doesn't appear natural, such as bass lures. A bass that's been hooked by a crankbait and escapes may in the future avoid food that wobbles or rattles. But bass can't reject a live minnow, crayfish, or amphibian because these animals compose the diet of big fish. They present few negative cues to bass."

Beyond this—what may be the real key to livebait's effectiveness—living prey has the instinct to flee from predators. "When I'm fishing a big wild shiner and feel my bait begin knocking and twitching, or even see it leap from the water, I know it'll soon be eaten," Hannon explains. "This flight response triggers big bass to strike. Live minnows literally radiate fear when a big bass approaches. No artificial bait can do that."

SHINER FISHING FOR LUNKER BASS— AN INSIDE LOOK

"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 Jack-

son, 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 of 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 this scenario, the angler sets the stage by offering a bait, then watches and feels the reactions of both 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 is 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.

ABOUT SHINERS

In Florida, guides or bait collectors gather wild golden shiners, technically known as *Notemigonus chrysoleucas*. The golden shiner occupies nearly all suitable waters from the Atlantic Coast west through Texas, up into the Dakotas, 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.

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,



Captain Jamie Jackson hefts a shiner-caught lunker from Lake Toho.



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

insect larvae, small snails, and algae.

Pond-raised shiners are widely available, but experts prefer wild ones 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 (shiners 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.

SHINER RIGGING, FLORIDA STYLE

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. 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 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 it generally rides above the level of the vegetation, and 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 rods with medium-fast action. 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, he used Shakespeare's 7½-foot Intrepid flippin' sticks with Pflueger Trion 66 reels.

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 Ambassadeur 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 it's functional, tough, and cheap. Jackson prefers 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, a large shiner can pull it under and you won't know when a light-biting bass has eaten 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 chasing shiners to the surface, I shorten the distance. I lengthen 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, only 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.”

LIVEBAITIN' LOCATIONS

On Toho, Okeechobee, Stick Marsh, Lake Walk-In-Water, and other great fisheries, nearly all bass action takes place in less than 7 feet of water. Florida lakes contain many species of submerged, floating, and emergent plants. These 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 maiden-cane. 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.”

Years ago, I fished shiners over similar areas in the natural lakes of New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. Though my approach wasn’t as sophisticated as what shiner guides employ, I caught lots of bass and some real sporty ones.

In Minnesota, shiners aren’t often used 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 walleyes 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. Alternatively, impaling a shiner on a ballhead jig is deadly when bass hold among weed clumps or breaks. A jighead 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 slipsinker 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 reports. “The times of moonrise and moonset, which are solunar majors and minors, 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 morning or evening, or with a falling barometer. Similarly, activity around the solunar periods is 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 several days after it. The new moon has no downside."

Although it can't be predicted far in advance, Jackson and many other experts link feeding activity to barometric pressure. Overall, Jackson expects bass to feed actively with lots of surface action when the barometer is falling, and a fair bite under steady conditions. But after a front, when the barometer rises, he rigs shiners farther from the float to fish deeper in cover, as plankton, preyfish, and bass hold deeper and are less active. Freelineing often is the best approach, and great catches are unusual then.

RELEASING BASS CAUGHT WITH BAIT

When Doug Stange fished with Jackson, he was at first alarmed to see that bass swallowed the big shiners and often were hooked in the esophagus. "The

Hook Removal

- [1] While holding the fish by the lower jaw, look to see if the hook is embedded in the right or left side of the gullet (the shank of the hook will lie on the opposite side). If the point is embedded on the fish's left side (shank on right side), work through the right gill cover, and vice versa. If the hook eye is out of sight, give a light tug on the line and the eye and part of the shank usually emerge.
- [2] Using your finger, or a dehooking tool, reach in through the last gill arch on that side of the fish and pull on the eye so it rolls out below the gill toward the side of the fish.
- [3] At that point, the barb often pops free of the papery-white throat tissue.
- [4] Reach into the fish's mouth and grip the bend of the hook, which should be facing out of the fish's mouth.
- [5] Pull it free. If the fish's mouth is too small to reach with your fingers, use a needle-nose pliers to grip the hook bend.



first time it happened,” Stange says, “I looked at Captain Jackson with an ‘oh-oh’ look, but he calmly took the fish, reached under its gill flap and popped the hook out, then released it in fine shape. We probably caught 40 fish in two days of fishing, and at least one-fourth of them were hooked deep. Yet every bass was released in good condition.

“Fears of killing bass may be one of the reasons some avid anglers avoid fishing live shiners or other bait,” Stange continues. “We even hear reports of efforts to ban livebait in some areas. With a practice run, anyone can safely release deeply hooked bass, as well as walleyes and other species. It’s one of the most remarkable things I’ve seen in recent years.

“I think this technique is the next major step anglers can take to improve release rates. Remember, too, that this technique works to remove tubes, worms, and other plastic baits that are swallowed.

“Contrary to popular belief, the gills of bass and other large gamefish are tough and resilient. How else could they eat snapping crayfish or feisty bullheads? And if a bass is bleeding? It’s still releasable. Just get it back in the water quickly. Jackson often recaptures distinctively marked, deep-hooked bass that have been released this way.”

All the technical discussion aside, fishing with shiners is an art that, when practiced correctly, allows anglers to target big bass and catch them consistently. The action often is surprisingly fast—even furious. Stange: “Really, I think most anglers, even those accomplished at lure fishing, still love to fish with floats. I couldn’t quite get over how fast the action was when we were on fish, which was most of the time. A shiner would go wild under the float, then pop to the surface to escape a bass. The anticipation waiting for it to get eaten is truly exciting.

“One major rush for someone like me, who rarely gets to fish for bass over 6 pounds, is that every hookset in Toho might be something twice as large as you’ve ever caught before. The underlying theme isn’t just ‘big bass from Florida lakes,’ it’s that these tactics can be applied to fishing for bigger largemouth and smallmouth bass in many situations.”



PHOTO | JIM GRONAW

Jim and Matt Gronaw have found bluegills an effective and economical path to lunker bass.