

Give 'em some lip

East Texas guide offers some tips to help anglers hook more bass on lipless cranks

BY MATT WILLIAMS
Outdoors Writer

I'd like to have a dime for every bass that has been caught on a lipless crankbait. Heck, make that a nickel. Either way I could probably kick back and live life on Easy St. from here on out.

Of all the artificial lures bass anglers use to fish for bass, few produce the consistently good results that a lipless crankbait does.

It will work in cold or warm water that is stained, clear or muddy and at varied depths from shallow to deep.

Another huge plus is the bait ranks among the most user-friendly around. Anyone, regardless of their angling skill, can catch bass on a lipless crankbait. Just chuck it, wind it and hold on tight. That's why pro anglers sometimes refer to it as a "monkey bait." It is so simple to fish with that a monkey could probably catch one on it.

So named because it does not have a nose bill or lip like other styles of crankbaits, the lipless crankbait is an elongated, flat-sided plug. It is usually equipped with two treble hooks and a built-in rattle chamber that contains one or more BBs of varied sizes. The line tie is generally positioned slightly forward on the bait's back, which causes it to ride nose down as it speeds through the water column with an enticing wiggle and a rowdy rattling commotion that draws bass from afar.

This family of lures will catch fish year around, but they shine especially bright during winter and early spring. Especially on East Texas lakes that offer a bounty of hydrilla beds for the bass to prow around in.

Hydrilla is a hardy aquatic plant that roots to bottom and forms tough stalks known to grow at depths of 12 feet or more with sufficient water clarity and sunlight. The grass forms a canopy on the surface during the summer months, but typically dies back in cold weather. This creates a window of open water between the surface and the top of the grass, which is ideal for throwing lipless crankbaits.

The trick is to make a lengthy cast, then retrieve the bait at a speed just fast enough to keep it ticking or grabbing the top stalks of grass on the way in without burying up and fouling. Often times, the bait tearing free of the grass is what triggers the "reaction strike."

"What happens is the grass stops the bait for a split second and then it breaks free," explained Stephen Johnston of Hemphill. "When that happens it causes the bait to react wildly and causes a sudden fluttering sound. That's usually when they'll hammer it."

Johnston is a veteran bass pro and Toledo Bend/Sam Rayburn fishing guide. Like many tournament anglers,

he has learned that throwing a lipless crankbait all day long is a laborious task that can earn you come big bucks at the weigh in. At times, it can cost you dearly if you don't.

Johnston also has learned that being consistently successful with a lipless crankbait demands the proper set-up in terms of the rod, reel and line. Some other key factors to consider are bait size, brand and color.

"There is a lot more to it than walking into a tackle shop and buying a red Rat-L-Trap and going out and chugging it," he said.

I recently spent a day on the water with Johnston and asked him to break down the specifics:

■ **Rod choice:** Johnston prefers a rod that is 6 ½ to 7 ½ feet long with a medium/heavy action. He says the long rod helps him launch long casts, while the stiff action allows him to "pop" or "rip" the bait free when it connects with the grass.

"If you use too limber a rod the bait will load up in the grass and foul," he said. "You won't catch many fish if you're reeling in a big wad of grass every other cast."

■ **Line:** Johnston uses fluorocarbon line exclusively on his lipless cranks. Fluorocarbon does not stretch like monofilament line, which aids in popping baits free from the grass. Johnston prefers 12-14 pound test line on ¼ and ½ ounce lures, 16-20 pound test on ¾ and 1 ounce baits.

■ **Reel:** A bait casting reel with proper reel ratio is essential for lipless crankbait fishing. Reel ratio dictates the speed at which the line is gathered on line spool with each revolution of the reel handle. A reel with 8.1:1 reel ratio gathers line significantly faster than one with a 6.3:1 ratio.

Johnston says it is important to use a reel that moves the bait at a speed that allows it to stay in contact with the grass, but not so fast or slow that it is counterproductive.

"The first thing most people do when they aren't getting bit on a lipless crankbait is speed up their retrieve," he explained.

"But that's the wrong thing to do. You should always slow down. A reel with slower gear ratio forces you to do that. When choosing a reel, choose one with a gear ratio that allows you to work the bait at the speed the fish want it and at the proper depth."

■ **Bait size:** Lipless baits come in a variety of sizes. Baits weighing ¼, ½, ¾ and 1 ounce are the most popular for bass fishing.

Johnston always takes the depth of the grass into consideration when choosing a lipless crank. The smaller the void between the surface and the grass, the lighter the bait he uses.

"If the grass is 2-3 feet below the surface I'm always going with the ¼



Photos by Matt Williams

Above: East Texas bass pro Stephen Johnston says the lipless crankbait is a must-have lure for fishing on East Texas grass lakes during late winter and early spring. **Top photo:** Lipless crankbaits come in a wide variety of colors, sizes and brands. Johnston says there are times when making slight adjustments in lure size, color and sound can make the difference in success and failure to get bit.

ounce," he said. "If it is 3-6 feet deep I'll switch to a ½ or ¾ ounce. Anything deeper I'll go to a one ounce."

■ **Color:** Lipless baits come in every color under the sun, but Johnston prefers to stick with basics. He says a 'Rayburn red is hard to beat on grass lakes with relatively clear water. He also likes a Zombie color or chrome/blue. In off-color water he always switches to something with some chartreuse in it, because the fish can see it better.

■ **Sound:** All lipless crankbaits are equipped with rattles, but no two

brands sound exactly the same. At times, Johnston says the pitch of the sound can make a difference in the number of bites you'll get.

"Early in the year I don't think it makes that big a difference because the fish haven't seen a lot of pressure," he said. "But after they start getting some pressure it can make a huge difference. If you're not getting bit and other fishermen around you are, it could just be a matter of switching to a bait that makes a little bit of a different sound. If you are fishing with a partner,

experiment with different baits to see which one works best. As a rule I like a loud bait on real windy days and something more subtle on days when its calm and the water is slick as glass."

Fishing a lipless crankbait isn't rocket science, but it helps to know a little bit about lure selection and other gear when you are truly serious about using it to catch fish.

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Ashley grabs home state Bassmaster Classic victory

BY MATT WILLIAMS
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In many cases having the home lake advantage in a bass tournament can be more of a curse than it is a charm. Not so for South Carolinian, Casey Ashley.

Ashley, 31, used his vast knowledge of 55,000-acre Lake Hartwell in Greenville, S.C., to rack up the biggest win of his pro career on Feb. 20-22 — the 2015 Bassmaster Classic.

In three days the personable pro from nearby Donalds sacked up just as many limits of feisty Hartwell largemouths and spotted bass totaling 50 pounds, 1 ounce. He saved his very best performance until the final day, when he brought in a five-fish limit weighing 20 pounds, 3 ounces.

The Day 3 rally carried him from fifth place to first by a four-pound margin over second-place finisher Bobby Lane. Interestingly, he did it on a homemade fish-head spinner lure that his father, Danny, built in his garage.

Ashley took home \$300,000 cash and a handsome champion's trophy for the win.

Plus, he earned the chance to capitalize on a wealth of endorsement opportunities that typically come with winning what many consider to be bass fishing's biggest prize. With his southern charm, chamber of commerce smile and proven talent, the young pro has all the goods to pull it off.

He'll be a great ambassador for the sport.

Takahiro Omori of Emory notched a third-place finish, the best of five Texas qualifiers. James Niggemeyer of Van, 21st; Todd Faircloth of Jasper, 23rd; Keith Combs of Huntington, 25th; and Shinichi Fukae of Mineola, 42nd.

T-Bend flexes muscle in TTT

Toledo Bend may be the hottest bass lake in the state these days for numbers and whopper bass, alike. The proof is in the puddin'. Check out the final results of the Texas Tournament Trail team event held on Feb. 21.

The big lake along the Texas/Louisiana border kicked out nearly a dozen sacks in excess of 20 pounds. Bart Blakelock and James Benedict won it with a 35.56-pound limit that included three fish over eight pounds. Their heaviest bass was an 11.42 pounder.

The anglers reported that they caught their fish using a Rayburn Red Rat-L-Trap around submerged hydrilla beds in 6-8 feet of water. The win was worth more than \$32,000 in cash and prizes, including a fully rigged Triton bass boat.

Allen inducted to Hall of Fame

Veteran Texas bass pro Harold Allen of Shelbyville was inducted to the Bass Fishing Hall

of Fame during a special ceremony preceding the 2015 Bassmaster Classic held recently on Lake Hartwell in Greenville, S.C.

Allen, who turns 70 in June, is a longtime Skeeter/Yamaha pro who is recognized as one of the best offshore structure fishermen in the business.

A 15-time Bassmaster Classic qualifier, Allen was joined in the HOF induction ceremony by bass pro Stacey King, industry entrepreneur Bill Huntley and veteran Bassmaster writer, Don Wirth.

"It was great honor," Allen said. "The room was full and I had some good friends by my side. That made it even more special."

CCA chapter to host banquet

The East Texas Chapter of the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) will host its 2015 fundraising banquet on March 6 at the Nacogdoches County Civic Center. Doors open at 6 p.m.

CCA is a non-profit organization that works to conserve, promote and enhance coastal fisheries and habitat. The organization has more than 200 chapters throughout 17 states and has a current membership of nearly 100,000.

The upcoming banquet will feature live and silent auctions and all sorts of raffles. Some of the top items on the auction menu include guided trips to Port Bolivar, Baffin Bay and Crystal

Beach, vacation packages to Costa Rica, Alaska and Cabo San Lucas, numerous art prints, crafts and much more.

Those who attend will enjoy a catfish dinner catered by Clear Springs. Ticket prices are \$45 for individuals and \$75 for couples.

For more information contact Brent Rodgers at 936-554-4866 or Dan Hafer, 936-652-0260.

FLW, Elites open regular season

The 2015 regular seasons for the Wal-Mart FLW Tour and Bassmaster Elite Series pro bass tournament trails get underway this month.

FLW's season opener is set for March 5-8 on Lake Toho, where warming water temperatures have already beckoned bass into the shallows to spawn. Many anglers are anticipating this one to turn into a big bass slugfest with some huge weights hauled to the scales.

The Elite Series opener is scheduled for March 19-22 on the Sabine River in Orange. The Elites visited the Sabine for the first time ever in 2014 and it dished out super tough fishing as many of the nation's top pros struggled to find limits.

Jasper's Todd Faircloth won the 2014 event with 49 pounds, 6 ounces and will be looking to repeat this year.