

FRESHWATER



Sharpening blade techniques for bass

Fall and early winter are the times when blade baits shine in Florida waters

By John N. Felsher
Freshwater Beat

Minutes from the launch, we stopped at a cut connecting this lake to another in the Harris Chain of Central Florida. Three casts later, Capt. Steve Niemoeller of Central Florida Guide Service fought a 6-pound bass while I threw a topwater bait. Two more casts, and he connected with a 3-pounder, convincing me to switch to a blade bait.

Blade baits, like a SteelShad, Silver Buddy, Gay Blade or Vibe-E, look like short scimitars. Generally about two to five inches long, they resemble threadfin shad in size and action. They give off excellent flash and vibration as they flutter through the water.

"A blade can work at any time, but if I had to pick one season to use one, it would be the fall," explained Stephen Browning, a professional angler from Hot Springs, Arkansas. "That's when bass feed heavily upon shad and tend to chase baits better. I particularly like to use a blade in a lake that gets a lot of pressure from lipless crankbaits."

Highly versatile baits, blades might entice bass wherever an angler may throw a crankbait or spinnerbait. Crank it with a steady retrieve or yo-yo it up and down like a spinnerbait. Bounce it off stumps or other obstructions or work it parallel to weeds. Some anglers drag them across sandy flats, occasionally thumping bottom to create a mud trail. Run them over submerged vegetation, occasionally letting them fall just a bit into the tops of the grass.

"A straight retrieve works well, but the best retrieve is a pump and drop," Browning said. "Most fish hit it as it falls. Stay in contact with the bait on the fall. Allow the bait to fall on a slack line, but watch the line very carefully."

Niemoeller "tunes" his SteelShads to run in particular directions. Although made of virtually indestructible steel, the thin blade bends easily. Out of the package, it normally runs straight with a throbbing vibration, but bending the tail slightly can make a blade track in a certain direction. The curved tail also makes it rise and flop sideways on the surface like a wounded shad. A skilled angler can flutter a blade across the surface, almost like a topwater bait.

"I put my thumb on the blade right behind the weight," Niemoeller said. "Where my thumbnail ends, I bend the tail about 90 degrees. If you're looking at a bank on the right



Capt. Steve Niemoeller of Central Florida Guide Service shows off a bass he caught on a SteelShad blade bait while fishing on the Harris Chain of lakes near Mount Dora. FF Weekly photo by John N. Felsher

and want it to run along that bank, bend the tail to the right while looking at the face of the bait. By doing that, I can run a bait sideways along a bulkhead, stump line or the edge of a weed bed. If I want it to run straight again, I just bend it back into its original position. For schooling fish, I put a little bend in the tail to make it run to the surface and throw it past the school."

Since blade baits closely resemble shad, they devastate schooling bass or any predators that key on threadfin shad or similar prey. Bass frequently herd shad to the surface and attack from all sides. Watch for them breaking the

surface and drop a blade into the frenzy.

"A blade bait is highly effective around schooling fish," said Mark Menendez, a professional bass angler from Paducah, Kentucky who prefers the Vibe-E. "It can cast a mile with great accuracy. I like a 1/4-ounce blade early in the year after the shad spawn and a 1/2-ounce size during the rest of the year. Around schooling bass, I fish it on 12-pound Berkley fluorocarbon line. I like to rip it and let it fall under the schoolers. Sometimes, I run it one to three feet under the surface and burn it back to the boat as fast as I can to make it vibrate

like crazy."

When the school stops herding shad to the surface, try vertically jigging over a deep hole. Heavy and streamlined, blade baits sink quickly, reaching great depths. Simply drop one over the side and let it sink. After it hits bottom or the desired depth, raise and lower the rod tip to pump the bait up and down. When it falls, it mimics a dying shad.

Although primarily designed to attract largemouth bass, a blade bait might entice anything that eats a shad, which includes just about every game fish in North America! In Florida, Niemoeller caught bass, crap-

pie, catfish and several saltwater species with a SteelShad. It also works on freshwater trout, walleye, muskie, pike, smallmouth bass, stripers, white bass and other predators.

"It can catch fish from 6 inches to 60 feet," Niemoeller said. "I've had trips where I've caught 40 to 50 bass on it with some up to 8.5 pounds."

For booking trips with Niemoeller, call 386-846-2861 or see www.Cffishing.com. For more about SteelShads, see SteelShad.com.

John N. Felsher is the associate editor of Sport Fishing magazine. www.JohnNFelsher.com.

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