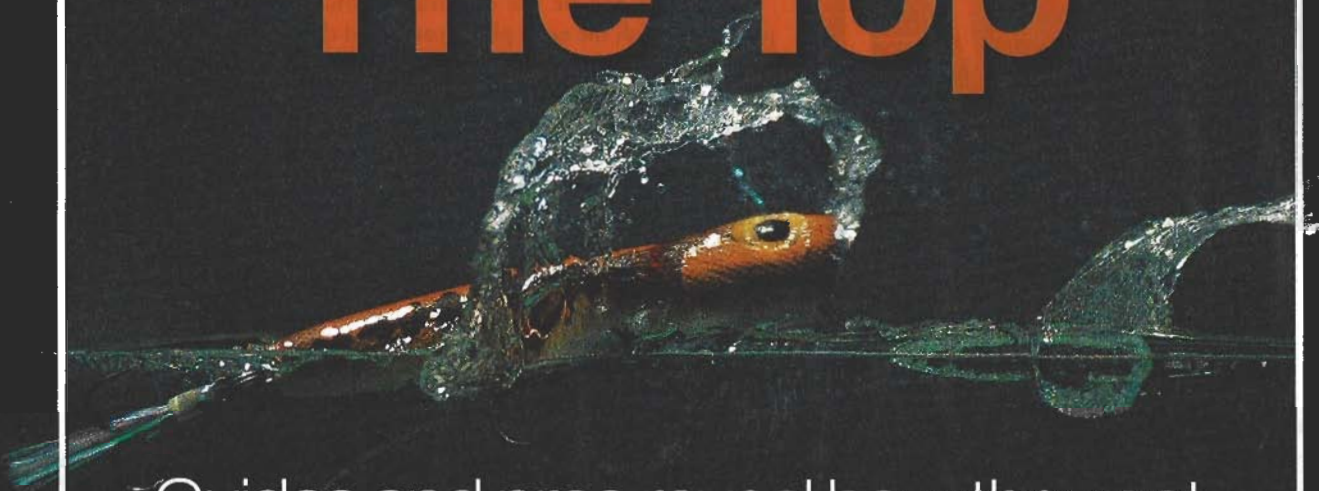


# Over The Top



## Guides and pros reveal how they get more from topwaters year-round

**T**opwaters. Their reputation for catching bass precedes them. Although every nerve anticipates the strike, you still flinch when your offering is ground zero in an explosion of fish and water. For all of topwater fishing's excitement, however, most anglers limit it to ploop-ploping a popper around shallow cover on still summer mornings.

It doesn't have to be that way. Topwater presentations have much broader applications in both time and space. And the rewards of this broader view of effective applications are more and bigger bass—fish that anglers who follow the beaten path haven't pressured and won't catch.

To help you build and improve your topwater game, I've harvested the knowledge of six expert sticks, all of whom have built and perfected their skills on bass fishing's most competitive tournament trails: Terry Baksay from Connecticut; Oklahoman Ken Cook; New Yorker Burnie Haney; Zell Rowland from Texas; Mississippian Alfred Williams; and Derek Yamamoto from Nevada. Collectively, they share the wisdom gained from tens of thousands of days on the water.

### When And Where

This team of experts agrees that topwaters can be productive from the moment the water temperature climbs into the mid-50s in spring

through fall. I've seen the same thing play out on the Tennessee River and northern Alabama and Mississippi lakes, with the fall topwater bite staying strong down to about 50 degrees.

One presentation doesn't fit all during this long and diverse span of time and temperatures. Each sub-phase of this larger picture requires a unique approach to wring the most from fishing on the water's ceiling.

In the prespawn, for example, bass are moving shallow. Fish cover on shallow flats, broad points, and in the backs of large bays and coves. Boat docks and any remaining aquatic vegetation are also choice topwater targets. Bass tend to be aggressive, so cover water quickly.

During the spawn, most of my pros lay off topwaters. Haney, however, will try to trigger a territorial strike from bedding bass by twitching a Sammy 85 over its head. Williams, too, reasons that shallow-spawning Southern bass can be provoked to the surface, so he stays in the shallow pockets he's been fishing during the prespawn and keeps his Boy Howdy kicking water.

The key to both presentations is determining what it takes to irritate the bass enough to make it strike—then repeating it.

I suggest keeping a topwater handy during the spawn for two other reasons. First, not all bass spawn at the same time. Even when you see a bunch of fish on beds, some bass are prespawn and,

by Dr. Hal Schramm

## ZELL ROWLAND

### Ideal Conditions:

Postspawn through summer. Ripple on the water with one to two feet of visibility; choppy if the water is clear.

### Primary Retrieve:

None—always mix it up.

### Minimum Water Clarity:

Less than one foot.

### Rod:

American Rodsmith Zell Rowland.

### Reel Gear Ratio:

6:1.

### Line:

Clear monofilament.

### Tip For Greenhorns:

"Get experience triggering bites and making proper hooksets by fishing small topwater lures."

### Tip For Veterans:

"Throw a topwater when you might otherwise throw a crankbait."

### Go-To Lure:

XCalibur Zell Pop. Fish it over rocks or vegetation.



## BUENIE HANEY

### Ideal Conditions:

Summer; slick surface or slight ripple, partly cloudy skies, early and late in the day.

### Primary Retrieve:

Pull-pause-pull-pull-pause.

### Minimum

**Water Clarity:** Rarely an issue in Northeastern lakes.

### Rod:

6-foot, 6-inch Kistler fast action, medium power.

### Reel Gear Ratio:

6.3:1.

### Line:

14- to 17-pound mono.

### Tip For Greenhorns:

"Let the fish tell you how fast to work the bait, and never set the hook until you feel the fish's weight."

### Tip For Veterans:

"Build the confidence to fish topwaters in the middle of bright, clear days."

### Go-To Lure:

Lucky Craft Sammy 115 in Aurora Gold. Fish it over vegetation.



depending on where you are in the spawning cycle, some may be postspawn.

Also, topwaters can rev up a bedded fish that otherwise wouldn't bite anything. I've had bass that had previously ignored my bed baits whack the same presentation after I had pulled a buzzbait over its head several times.

Topwaters can be the optimum choice all day long immediately postspawn. Fish the same places you fished during the prespawn, as well as stopping points along migration routes from spawning sites to deeper summer haunts. Always look for subtle cover. The stuff that's easy to spot is the cover the other guy has already fished. Rowland does this by scanning for signs like a dark shadow or a dark ring around shallow water that indicates understated clumps of vegetation. A scouting trip during midday might help you find cover to fish early or late in the day on your next trip.

Cook and Williams, however, center all of their postspawn topwater fishing on baitfish. While seeing shallow bait during the prespawn is a rarity, baitfish are now bunching up on flats in preparation for their own spawning ritual.

## Endless Summer

When summer settles in, it's critical to diversify your attack. Rowland prefers shallow areas with good cover, especially large weedbeds.

Baksay chimes in that grass overrides all other cover. He recommends throwing topwaters along the weedbed edge, casting to irregularities, and then fish over the grass itself.

In Northern lakes, the inside edges of weedbeds that grow a short distance off shore consistently offer a strong topwater pattern. Some of the best action I've enjoyed has been along the edges of sunfish beds.

In Western reservoirs, follow Yamamoto's lead and focus on rocks.

Cook and Haney target offshore drop-offs, humps, rock piles and weedbeds. Baksay, too, throws topwaters to smallmouth bass holding on humps and rock piles.

Williams keys on shad, wherever they swim. The mindset brings up an important point: whether you're fishing inshore or offshore, always have a topwater within reach to throw to bass corralling baitfish at the surface.

## Autumn Action

When fall begins and water temperatures begin their downhill slide, the pattern understandably changes. If you fish Southern waters where shad is the primary forage, all you need to do is find them. Shad schools can be anywhere early in the fall, but they steadily move into shallow water. Prime areas are shallow creek mouths and the backs of coves and bays. Expect bass around any concentrations of baitfish, but schools of larger, 3- to 6-inch shad are more likely to attract and hold bigger fish.

From my own experience, not all coves will hold dense schools of shad, and an area that was loaded with shad and bass one year may have few the next, so check several places. Work areas with cover and subtle depth changes, but also

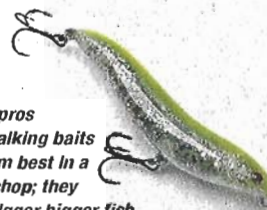
## Top Guns

**Poppers:** These topwater standards are generally best in calm conditions, especially when bass are feeding on small baitfish.



**Sébile Ghost Walker 110**

**Walkers:** The pros agreed that walking baits usually perform best in a light surface chop; they also tend to trigger bigger fish.



fish the middle of the cove, as well as along any weedbeds. Make note of the depth, cover and how far back in the cove you got bit, because this pattern will often repeat in other locations on the same water.

North of the shad zone, a lake's predominant forage may be sunfish, yellow perch, minnows or crayfish. Whatever it is, you need to identify it and concentrate your topwater efforts—and all fishing for that matter—in the species' core areas. Weedbeds, especially inside edges, are good places to start.

### Where Waters Run Deep

Some lakes, particularly deep canyon or highland reservoirs like Amistad, Mead and Bull Shoals, produce good topwater action in open water. Clear water is essential. Yamamoto, who learned his craft in clear,

Western reservoirs, says open-water fishing is as fun as it gets. A topwater lure will pull in suspended bass, but it will also bring bass off the bottom as deep as 50 feet.

Yamamoto usually concentrates his open-water topwater fishing over or near some type of deep structure, such as a point, ledge, ditch or rock pile.

Cook and Williams, subscribe to the axiom that bass relate to forage above all else, so they fish topwaters over schools of baitfish, whether there is structure or not. Rowland and Yamamoto add that although baitfish are the trump card, anglers should be willing to explore topwater prospects even if they don't see bait on their electronics.

Fishing over 20-plus feet of water can be intimidating

enough, but when structure is abundant and schools of shad are almost everywhere, how do you narrow the search?

Rowland and Williams do it by picking apart areas where baitfish are positioned highest in the water column. Williams adds that he throws topwaters wherever he sees shad flicking or dimpling the surface, or where gulls are diving.

Haney says the Great Lakes and other large waters give up a tremendous topwater bite along foam and trash lines. These areas, often formed at current interfaces, will concentrate baitfish and bass.

### Midday Opportunities

It's no secret that early and late in the day are the best times for topwaters, but the experts agree that the lures will catch bass throughout the day. The peak midday opportunities are when baitfish are near the surface or surfacing. Haney finds holes and cuts in emergent vegetation can be productive throughout the day.

If the bass were hitting topwaters but the bite dies, Williams keeps throwing the baits whenever he thinks fish are still in the area. Confidence is key.



**Lucky Craft SplashTail 90**  
**Propbaits:** These lures are top choices when fishing along weedlines, or when throwing to fish immediately after the spawn.

**Booyah Counter Strike Buzz**  
**Buzzbaits:** Few topwater situations don't lend themselves well to buzzbaits. Although when dealing with fish in matted weeds, it's better to substitute a soft plastic toad.

For more information on lures featured in this story, click on Web Extras at FishingClub.com.

KEN  
COOK



#### Ideal Conditions:

Postspawn, water temperature near 70 degrees, when bass are searching for food and not tight to cover.

#### Primary Retrieve:

Walk-walk-walk-pause; make the lure look like it's struggling.

#### Minimum Water Clarity:

18 inches; use a noisier bait when water is more turbid.

#### Rod:

6-foot, 6-inch Fenwick Techna AV, medium or medium-light power.

#### Reel Gear Ratio:

6.4:1.

#### Line:

Trilene Sensation, 14-pound test or lighter.

#### Tip For Greenhorns:

"Fish a mid-size chugger around cover all day long and learn how to manipulate it."

#### Tip For Veterans:

"Expand on your favorites; use different baits and retrieves."

#### Go-To Lure:

4-inch Storm Rattlin' Chug Bug; fish it anywhere you see shad.



DEREK  
YAMAMOTO



#### Ideal Conditions:

Sunny summer mornings, with a slight ripple on the water.

#### Primary Retrieve:

Slow to medium pace—smooth cadence.

#### Minimum Water Clarity:

Three feet.

#### Rod:

7-foot Kistler, medium-power, fast action (shorter for smaller baits).

#### Reel Gear Ratio:

7:1.

#### Line:

Gamma co-polymer; the heaviest you can get away with without turning off fish.

#### Tip For Greenhorns:

"Don't let all the variables frustrate you; get the right gear and learn to fish several topwater lures."

#### Tip For Veterans:

"Try different lures, new retrieves with familiar lures, different colors, and different lines to find the combinations that perform best."

#### Go-To Lure:

Kinami Jaywalker or three-hook Heddon Super Spook, clear or white belly with sparkle/dark back. Fish it around cover.



ALFRED  
WILLIAMS

**Ideal Conditions:**

Water clarity of two to three feet, 54- to 65-degree water, partly cloudy, light breeze.

**Primary Retrieve:**

Jerk-pause-jerk-jerk-pause; pauses should span a half-second to five seconds.

**Minimum Water Clarity:** Two feet.

**Rod:**

6-foot, 6-inch Fenwick Techna AV, medium-heavy.

**Reel Gear Ratio:**

7:1 (speed is not for working lure, but for picking up line to fire a cast to a bass that breaks).

**Line:**

15-pound Trilene Big Game.

**Tip For Greenhorns:**

"Work the lure in such a way as to create an easy meal for bass."

**Tip For Veterans:**

"Listen to the lure—note its sound like when it triggers a strike."

**Go-To Lure:**

Cordell Boy Howdy in chrome/black back; I fish it around cover in the backs of creek arms.



TERRY  
BAKSAY

**Ideal Conditions:**

Anytime in summer when you find schooling fish.

**Primary Retrieve:**

Steady cadence. Slow down if bass are missing the lure; speed up if they are following but not striking.

**Minimum Water Clarity:**

Less than one foot, although you can fish a buzzbait in muddier water.

**Rod:**

6-foot All Star Platinum, medium action.

**Reel Gear Ratio:** 7:1.

**Line:** 20-pound Sufix.

**Tip For Greenhorns:**

"Get a short rod and a walking bait and go fish it. Build your confidence."

**Tip For Veterans:**

"Throw a topwater in open water."

**Go-To Lure:**

Rapala Skitter Walk, size 11, in gold chrome.



Yamamoto offers simple but sage advice—if you think a spot holds bass, throw a topwater to get a reaction bite first before working the spot using other presentations.

### Selection And Presentation

There is no hard-and-fast rule for choosing which lure to use when. Obviously, conditions such as matted vegetation make the call easier—soft-bait frogs that can be pulled across the surface without snagging are the way to go. And in the case of buzzbaits, the pros agree there are few bad times or places to throw them. When it comes to plugs, however, the answers aren't as cut-and-dried.

Although the exact applications differ, the topwater experts generally consider poppers most effective in relatively calm water, especially when bass are feeding on small baitfish.

Walking baits generally perform better in a light chop, and they have a deserved reputation for attracting bigger fish. Smaller lures, such as a Spook Jr., excel for drawing spotted bass out of deep water.

Probaits get the call along the edges of vegetation, as well as during and immediately following the spawn.

Whatever bait you choose, it's usually best to match your retrieve to the conditions. Cook, for example, vigorously works a Storm Chug Bug in windy, choppy conditions but switches to a subtle retrieve in quiet water.

Water clarity should also enter your lure selection criteria. Although topwaters are primarily visual baits, sound and vibration can also be involved, especially in dingy water. A popper, walker, probait or buzzbait is an option in clear conditions; when the visibility is less than a foot, a buzzbait or surface frog is usually a better choice.

Also use clarity to dial in how quickly you cover water. A good piece of cover always warrants multiple casts from different angles, but spread the casts out and fish faster in clear, open water; space casts closer together when visibility is limited.

Color is not a critical concern in bait selection, although my team of experts usually opts for lures that match the natural pattern for most prey fish: a white belly, silver or grayish sides and a dark back. Rowland insists on a dot of red near the line tie.

There are some exceptions, however. When sunfish dominate the forage base, a little orange on the belly is an asset. And Baksay relies on topwaters with yellow or chartreuse bottoms in Northern waters where perch are an important forage species.

### Top Thoughts

I certainly would not consider topwaters anytime, anyplace presentations, but the experts have proven that—used right—they catch fish shallow to deep, throughout the day, and from early spring to late fall. Tackling up is relatively painless—a half-dozen different styles and sizes of topwaters in basic, natural color patterns will cover most situations. Learning to fish each bait is easy—just watch it. Learning to fish the bait right is easy, too—just watch for the explosion.

### WEB EXTRA

### Follow Up Strong

Find out what Schramm's team of elite anglers say are the best lures to cast to a bass that just blew up on your topwater bait but missed. Just click on Web Extras at FishingClub.com.