

Five freshwater "temperate" bass at a reservoir near you

The Other

BASS'S

▶ **Striped bass** are among the members of the temperate bass family, which thrive in freshwater lakes, reservoirs, and rivers from California to Georgia.

▶ DAVE & EMILY WHITLOCK, WITH BILL BUTTS AND JOHN SMALLWOOD

Photo) Ben Levin

TEMPERATE BASS ARE A FAMILY OF FIVE GAME-FISH THAT ARE STRONG, INCREDIBLY AGGRESSIVE, AND BEAUTIFUL, FLY-EATING PRIZES. I vividly remember catching my first temperate bass on a fly in one of my favorite Oklahoma creeks when I was 16 years old. That strike and relentless fight had me convinced that I'd finally hooked my dream, 5-pound smallmouth. You can imagine how surprised—and then pleased—I was when I brought in an exotic 15-inch white bass that had worked its way up the Mississippi River to the Arkansas River and finally to my little creek.

The Other BASIS

Every year since then, I've been consistently taking these fine gamefish in streams and lakes all around the country. At age 80, I finally get to share this lifetime of experience with help from a pair of fly-fishing, freshwater temperate-bass specialists from Springfield, Missouri. Bill Butts and John Smallwood are magical when it comes to finding and catching temperates on flies, and have contributed significantly to this feature, as I consider them my gurus for temperate bass.

Fishy Cousins

Temperate bass are all in the family Percichthyidae (alt: Moronidae) and derive their more common family name from their wide tolerance to water temperatures between 55 and 75 degrees F. There are four "natural" family members: striped bass, white bass, yellow bass, and white perch; and also hybrid striped bass. Striped bass and white perch can live in both salt and fresh water, but the others live in fresh water only. Hybrids are a hatchery cross between male white bass and female striped bass. Hybrids are sterile, they have incredible strength and stamina, and for fly fishers they fill the size gap between the white bass that average 1 to 2 pounds, and striped bass that

grow to more than 50 pounds. Hybrids average 6 to 10 pounds but they fight like they weigh twice that much. Their body shape and abnormally large tails might suggest they are on performance-enhancing drugs.

Temperate bass roam in large schools, are aggressive feeders, fast swimmers, and flourish best in lakes, reservoirs, and the large rivers that flow in and out of these impoundments. Springtime, flowing-water spawners, they scatter their eggs over the gravel bottoms of streams when water temperatures reach 55 to 65 degrees F. The eggs sink or drift downstream, depending on the species, until they hatch.

Massive schools of these bass stage in high-flow streams and rivers to spawn, especially in the first two or three visible shoals above still water or below dam spillways or turbines. These fantastic runs usually carry on for two to four weeks. Unlike many other game species, these fish actively feed until the very hour they begin their spawning activity. Some waters that contain whites, hybrids, and stripers may experience three consecutive or overlapping runs of different species each spring! Any fly fisher would be overwhelmed with single-day catches of these three species.

Shad, herring, and shiners are their preferred foods, and they are most often caught on flies that imitate these baitfish. Crayfish, aquatic insects, leeches, eels, and worms are also on the menu. Wind, changing weather, or sudden water flow increases from precipitation runoff or dam releases

invigorates schools to hunt down baitfish and crayfish.

Some of the most exciting and wildly chaotic fly fishing you can experience in fresh water occurs when a big school of stripers, hybrids, or white bass herd a mass of baitfish to the surface or into the shallows. I've seen perfectly sane fly fishers have a melt-down when a big school erupts all around them!

Because they have excellent low-light vision, these bass most frequently feed at sunup, sundown, on dark cloudy days, and at night. Their large eyes assist in low-light vision, and sharp binocular focusing on fast-swimming prey. The best fly fishing for these five bass occurs when water temperatures range from 55 to 75 degrees F.

Tailwater Temperates

After spring spawning, temperates return to heavy foraging of baitfish, crayfish, and emerging, burrowing mayfly hordes all summer until late fall. By midwinter, water temperatures dip into the 40s, and their feeding slows considerably. This is a good time to seek these bass below tailwaters or warmwater discharge power lakes. As winter water temperatures give way to spring, this cycle starts again.

We have one area below a nearby dam that most evenings from July to October, when the generators are running, Em and I can wade and take four different temperates at the same time—stripers, white bass, yellow bass, and hybrids—using shad



► Many of the nation's best temperate bass fisheries are in man-made impoundments and in the rivers flowing into and out of them.

Photo | Dave & Emily Whitlock

streamers or poppers with droppers. On more than one occasion, I've watched her take temperate bass nearly every cast during the last hour of daylight. It is some of the most exciting fly fishing we could possibly wish for.

When temperate bass are not actively feeding in streams, they will hold around main current edges in root wads, submerged logs, and fallen trees. Rock formations also attract them, especially jetties, rip-rapped banks, and midstream rubble islands.

In lakes they hold and cruise along submerged river or creek channels and on windy points, flats, and rip-rap areas.

A boat outfitted with a fish locator is the ideal tool to find concentrations of temperate bass. I use a simple, 16-foot aluminum skiff and 25-hp motor with an electric motor for most of my temperate bass fishing in lakes and rivers. I always take along binoculars for spotting congregating gulls and the splashes and wakes of surface-feeding bass.

Fly Tackle

RODS. To choose the ideal fly tackle, first decide what sizes and weights of flies best imitate what your targeted bass are feeding on, and how much rod you'll need to control the fish, especially if hybrids and stripers are present. We believe that if we can only take one rod, the choice would have to be a 7-weight, 9-footer with a stout tip and mid-flex action. When targeting stripers and big hybrids only, an 8- or 9-weight, 9-foot rod is ideal. This caliber of tackle best handles the bigger flies, sinking-type lines and distances needed to reach these big, spooky, hefty prizes.

When white perch, white bass, and/or yellow bass are the only opportunities, I enjoy just using a 6-weight, 8½- or 9-foot rod. Usually these 1- to 3-pound fish are chasing bait from 1 to 3 inches long, so a 6-weight rod with a small fighting butt is perfect.

Since a typical temperate bass day usually requires a lot of casting with subsurface flies and sinking lines, I recommend a mid-flex action instead of a fast-action rod, especially for those fly fishers over 55, as it's much easier on joints.

FLY LINES. Our choice for just one line would be a weight-forward (WF), Type III, 10- to 15-foot sinking tip, but it's important to also have a weight-forward floating line like a RIO Clouser, and a clear, monofilament-core intermediate line such as a Stillwater Scientific Anglers line.

When I was striper fishing in the Arkansas Ozark Mountains on big, clear reservoirs a few years back, I cast threadfin shad streamers to pods of 10- to 35-pounders that were breaking and rolling on the surface. It was then I discovered that clear intermediate lines would outfish floating lines every time. The main reason for this is that these big guys, feeding just under the surface, were easily frightened by a highly visible floating line on the surface. As a result, I always carry a clear, intermediate line if I'm fishing streamers within 3 feet of the surface in calm, extra-clear lakes or rivers.



► Bill Butts (left) and John Smallwood sort through Dave Whitlock's collection of temperate bass flies.

Photo | Dave & Emily Whitlock

Top 10 States for Temperate Bass

- Alabama:** Lewis Smith Lake for stripers; and the Coosa River system including Weiss and Martin lakes for striped, hybrid, and white bass.
- Arkansas:** Beaver Lake and its tributaries the White River and War Eagle Creek; Norfork Lake and its primary tributary the North Fork of the White River; Ouachita Lake and the Ouachita River; and Greer's Ferry Lake.
- Georgia:** Lake Lanier for striped bass; the Coosa River system, Allatoona Lake, and the Chattahoochee River system, particularly southwest of Atlanta.
- Kansas:** Milford, Cedar Bluff, Cheney, Sebelius, and Webster reservoirs for white bass and hybrids.
- Kentucky:** Cumberland, Barkley, and Kentucky lakes for white, yellow, and striped bass; Barren River Lake for hybrids.
- Missouri:** Stockton Lake and its tributaries Little Sac and Sac rivers; Table Rock Lake and its tributaries the James and Kings rivers; Bull Shoals Lake and its tributaries the White River and Beaver Creek for white bass; and Truman Lake and Lake of the Ozarks for white bass and hybrids.
- South Carolina:** The Savannah River System including Hartwell and Clarks Hill lakes; the Santee and Cooper lakes system for stripers.
- Oklahoma:** Skiatook, Grand, Hudson, Ft. Gibson, Sooner, and Kaw lakes for hybrids and white bass; and the Arkansas River system including Keystone Lake, Webbers Falls Lake, Robert Kerr Reservoir, and Texoma Lake for striped bass.
- Tennessee:** Cumberland River system lakes and tailwaters for white and striped bass; J. Percy Priest Reservoir for hybrids; the TVA lakes and tailwaters of the Tennessee River for white bass, yellow bass, and stripers.
- Texas:** Texoma, Whitney, Buchanan, Palestine, and Tawakoni lakes for stripers, hybrids, and white bass.

The Other BASS

Be sure to back up these lines with at least 100 yards of 20-pound Dacron backing—more if your reel will hold it. Big temperates over 10 pounds can easily strip a lot of backing out before you know it.

I recommend short, 4-foot tapered leaders with 24 inches of 10- to 20-pound-test fluorocarbon tippet for use with sinking-tip and intermediate lines. Temperates are strong and seldom leader or tippet shy, and it's comforting to know that you have plenty of muscle in your leader, tippet, and backing when a big fish horses down your streamer and takes off across a lake or downstream. The first 20-pound striper I hooked on a fly emptied my Seamaster reel, and only my electric motor prevented it from a sure break-off.

FLIES. I believe that the most consistently effective flies for any fish are those that imitate what the species eats most often. For temperate bass that would be baitfish and crayfish. Crayfish are fed on mostly at night, so baitfish streamers occupy the most space in my fly box. We use streamers that are designed and tied to have swimming, darting zigzag, and jiggling actions. If there is significant surface feeding, wakers, divers, and poppers are occasionally effective.

We get a lot of boils and splashy/slashing surface breaks but often not consistent takes with surface flies. At that time, we have our best results with a combo of a surface popper and a good baitfish imitation tied on a 12- to 18-inch dropper.

Colorful, attractor streamers can also be successful. The universal attractors that so often work anywhere are the Clouser or Deceiver designs made with chartreuse and white bucktail or feathers.

A wide, side-view profile is important because so many fisheries contain baitfish in the herring family. The flies

should have big eyes, and large shoulders to push lots of water. It's also very important to make your flies snag resistant. Worrying about hang-ups can prevent you from correctly casting and fishing to those prime spots where the fish hang out, and losing your fly and riggering costs valuable fishing time.

Size is often important, too, especially when bass are feeding on a school of baitfish. Temperates can be very picky about matching their food, sometimes as selective as trout feeding on small, aquatic insect hatchlings. [For a specific list and photos of "Whitlock's 13 Indispensable Temperate Bass Flies" see flyfisherman.com/whitlocks-13. THE EDITOR.]

My best one-morning catch of stripers began at sunrise in a bay on a beautiful Ozark lake in late November. There appeared to be hundreds of 15- to 30-pound stripers at the surface just murdering threadfin shad.

I began with a 3-inch, size 2 Shad Sheep Minnow. For over an hour I cast into pod after pod of big, feeding fish and was totally rejected, and dejected. Then I saw several 1¼-inch,

stunned shad floating near the boat. I immediately tied on a size 6 Sheep Minnow and proceeded to hook these monsters on nearly every cast. Before 10:30 that morning, after the sun stopped the feeding frenzy, I'd landed six fish over 20 pounds on my down-sized shad fly!

In rivers, when the bite slows due to midday brightness, we regularly switch to 1- to 1½-inch steamers in either neutral-gray and white, or olive and gold, with amazing success.

Bill also has an interesting "match-the-size" system. He starts the day with a synthetic hair pattern 6 inches long, and simply trims it a bit at a time until the fish start taking it consistently. This system saves him time, and tells him what fly size is working best.

Fly fishers do seem to have an unresolvable dilemma however, when stripers in particular are chowing down on 10- to 15-inch and bigger shad and trout. When this happens, our biggest fly imitations are simply ineffective while conventional lure casters using 8- to 12-inch swimbaits, jerkbaits, and Zara Spooks take big fish after big fish. I guess we'll just

Whitlock's favorite temperate bass fly is a Deceiver-type baitfish imitation with large eyes and plenty of flash.



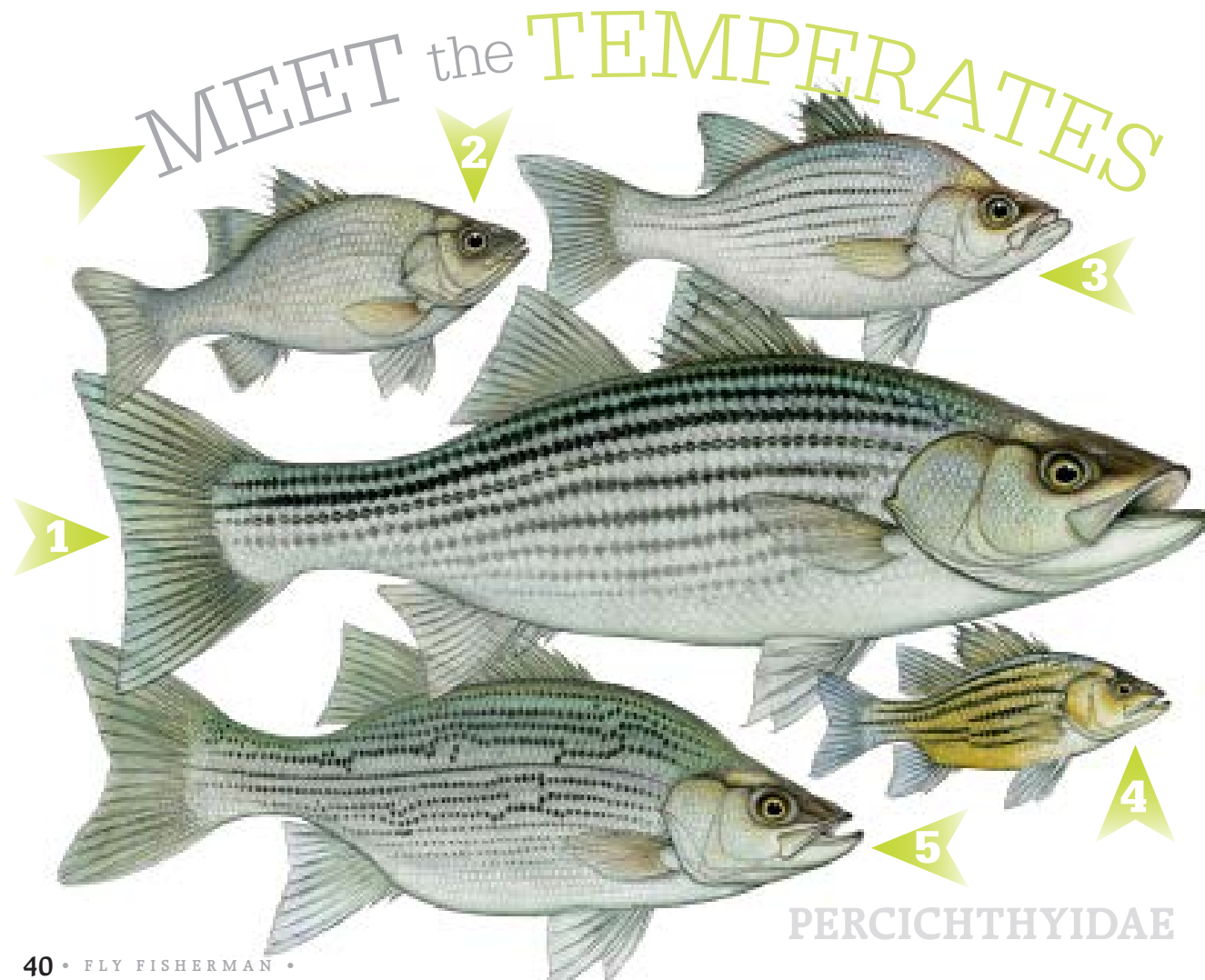
Photo: Dave & Emily Whitlock

keep working on that one.

Luckily, you don't find the same problem when fishing for smaller hybrids, white bass, yellow bass, and white perch. The occasional "big fly" problem can be overlooked when there is such a world of opportunity for these widely distributed, accessible, plentiful, and no-holds-barred

fly-eating bass. May the temperates be with you! 🐟

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1. STRIPED BASS

Morone saxatilis, also called rockfish, striper, and linesides
The largest bass in this family, they average 8 to 15 pounds with frequent 40-pound catches. Stripers are anadromous bass that live in the ocean and spawn in fresh water. They are native to the East Coast, but have been successfully introduced to the Pacific Coast in Oregon and California. In 1940 they were found living and reproducing in a freshwater reservoir: Santee and Cooper lakes. This find soon began a successful series of freshwater stocking of Santee-Cooper fish that, much like the successful introduction of Pacific salmon to the Great Lakes, created an amazing new chapter for temperate bass and hybrid sport fishing. The North American freshwater striper world record on fly rods is 54.5 pounds.

2. WHITE PERCH

Morone americana, also called silver perch and gray perch
The white perch is a native of the East Coast in salt, brackish, and fresh waters. It has occasionally been introduced to the Great Lakes and in some Midwest reservoirs. They average about a pound and closely resemble a white bass, but without the stripes, and are hard-fighting gamefish that also taste delicious.

3. WHITE BASS

Morone chrysops, also called sand bass and silver bass
White bass are freshwater temperates native to the Mississippi River and its tributaries. However, they have been introduced to nearly all stream and lake waters from the East Coast to the Plains States, and selected Western waters. They average about 2 to 3 pounds. The fly-fishing world record is 3.75 pounds. White bass are very prolific, and most states consider the spring spawning run a significant sporting event. Few states have size or number limits on them. Because of this, they are incredibly popular as sport and food fish.

4. YELLOW BASS

Morone mississippiensis, also called gold bass, brassy bass, barfish, yellow perch, streaker
The yellow bass is the smallest member of the family, normally weighing less than a pound. It is a freshwater native of the Mississippi River and the lower Arkansas and Red River drainages, and prefers deeper river and lake water than the white bass. Because of this, yellow bass are usually underharvested and tend to overpopulate and become stunted. However with their beauty, fight, and good taste, it is always delightful to take them on light fly tackle, especially in streams.

5. HYBRID BASS

Morone saxatilis x Morone chrysops, also called hybrids, wipers, palmetto bass, white rockfish, and sunshine bass
This hybrid is a highly prized freshwater gamefish and is usually raised by state and private hatcheries from a cross of a female striper and a male white bass. They are selectively used to upgrade sport fisheries and to control excessive populations of shad, suckers, sunfish, and other forage fish. Hybrid striped bass, like many hybrid crosses, are sterile, resulting in fast growth and large size, on average 3 to 8 pounds. The fly-fishing world record is almost 27 pounds.