

FINDING *Cold-Water* BASS



by Jeff Woleslagle photos by the author

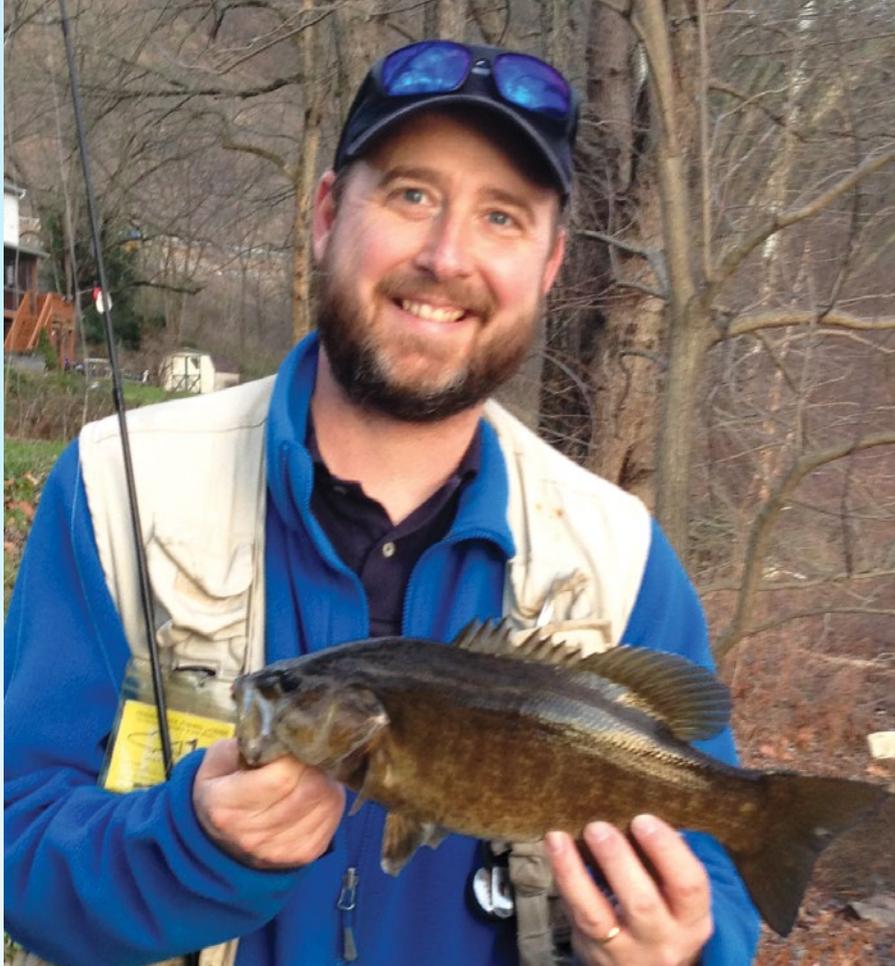
The weather had been absolutely brutal and fishing was far from my mind when my brother came back from an excursion to a local water with news that he had caught some nice bass. He was certain that the bass were tightly schooled. When he offered to take me to the spot, he didn't have to ask twice despite the thermometer reading. We walked along the bank, and he pointed to a drop off. We casted our white marabou jigs onto an ice shelf that had formed, reeled them to the edge of the hard water and let them fall. "Watch your line as it falls" instructed my brother. "The bite will be very soft." At that moment, I felt a slight 'tick' reverberate through the line. I set the hook hard into a nice Largemouth Bass, which gave a few hard surges before

it came out of the deep water. We went on to catch almost 12 bass from that spot before we ran out of willing fish and our fingers got numb. I learned some valuable lessons that day about finding and catching cold-water bass when most folks have long since hung up their fishing rods for the year.

On lakes and ponds, look for groups of fish in or near deep water and around structure. When fishing from a boat with electronics, look for submerged brush piles, rock piles and outcrops, man-made fish structures and anything else that would provide cover for baitfish on or near the bottom. When fishing from shore, look for areas that transition to deeper water and feature some type of structure. A downed tree or brush pile that extends from

the shore into deeper water can be an ideal location to set up shop.

I look for cold-water Smallmouth Bass in rivers in slightly different areas. Bass tend to gather in deeper channels and depressions, often near the bank. Pay close attention to undercut banks and deep channel swings as these spots can be prime. A friend and I once found a school of over 100 Smallmouth Bass holding tight to a shoreline rock wall against some deep water. We enjoyed some unbelievable late season fishing. The sun would heat up the rocks, which in turn made this a warm spot on the river. Whenever I am bass fishing during the colder months, I am always asking myself where the warmest water is located. Keep in mind that the fishing is often best at mid-day when the sun is high and a change in water temperature of just a few degrees can often spur a feeding window. Bass don't stop feeding when the water cools, fish just feed less often as their metabolism slows with the declining water temperatures. These fish will often be in large schools, and bass will generally remain in that locale for quite some time unless there is a rapid change in the weather or water level.



This late season Smallmouth Bass took a small grub on a 1/8-ounce jig head.



Soft plastics and hair jigs are excellent cold-water baits.

Baits that catch more than their share of cold-water bass include marabou jigs, hair jigs, jigging spoons, soft plastic grubs and suspending jerkbaits. I tend to downsize my baits in cold-water. In jigs and soft plastics, baits in the 1- to 3-inch range are often effective. Fish jigs slowly, with constant attention to the position of your line. Bites are often extremely soft and it has been my experience that there is a slightly longer window to set the hook in colder water. If I can force myself to pause for just a second when I sense the bite before setting the hook, I have a much higher catch ratio. When fishing jerkbaits, look for most of the strikes to be on the "pause" portion of the retrieve. I like to give the bait two solid jerks by sweeping the rod to the side as I reel and then pause the bait for 10- to 20-seconds, just letting it suspend in the water column, before repeating the sequence. Watch for the line to suddenly move right or left on the pause and if it does, set the hook immediately. Use jerkbaits in natural color patterns in the 2½- to 4-inch range. Cold-water fish won't mouth a jerkbait for long. Bass tend to congregate in colder water, so cycle back to areas where you catch fish throughout the day. Some bass in a group may be actively feeding while others are not. If you revisit an area, there is a good possibility that you will encounter new fish from the school that have become active.

Dress for the weather, and always wear your life jacket. Don't put your open water bass fishing gear away for the year. Cold-water bass are still actively feeding and worth the effort. ☐