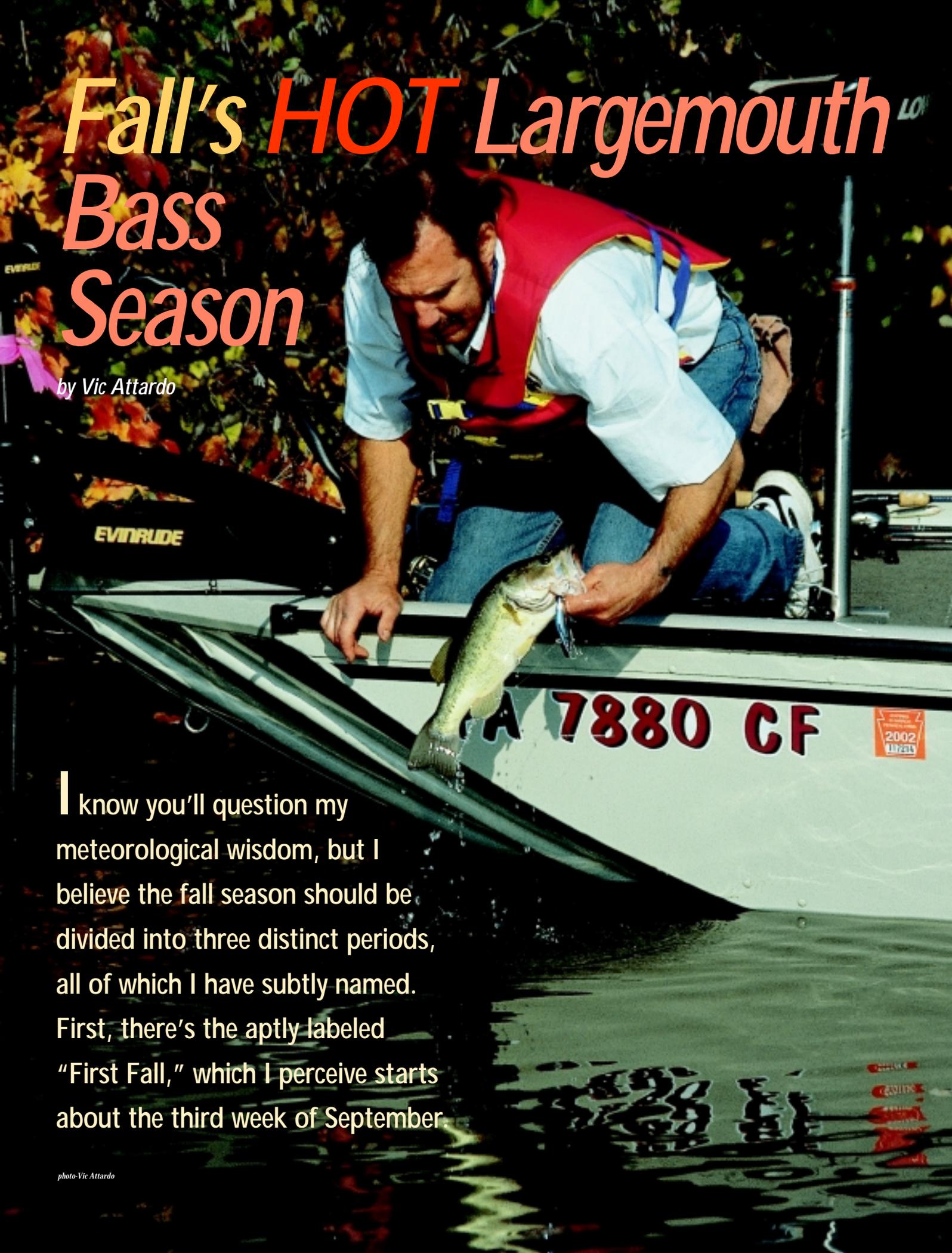


Fall's **HOT** Largemouth Bass Season

by Vic Attardo

I know you'll question my meteorological wisdom, but I believe the fall season should be divided into three distinct periods, all of which I have subtly named. First, there's the aptly labeled "First Fall," which I perceive starts about the third week of September.





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Most years this isn't fall at all—it's more like a cooling off of summer. I suppose this period could be called "Last Summer," but then we'd confuse it with the actual last summer, which I never seem to remember. In any case, there are days in First Fall when we can still wet wade, so what's fallish about that?

After First Fall, there's the three- or four-week period when leaves change color and drop from the trees. This beautiful process is usually complete by the second or third week of November, right about the start of buck season. It also includes the end of daylight-saving time and Halloween. This I consider to be "Real Fall."

Then there's "Third Fall." By this time, the hardwood trees are bare, there's often ice on the roads, and up in northcentral Pennsylvania or down in the Laurel Highlands, a good snow is not out of the question. Third Fall is also not fall at all—it's winter. You might call it "First Winter," but winter is long enough as it is.

Now that you have completed my home course in meteorology, let me tell you that the focus of this story is the second fall, or "Real Fall."

In my book, Real Fall runs about three or four weeks, from mid-October to mid-November. Water temperatures across the bottom half of the state hover in the upper 50s and very low 60s. Above I-80, water temperatures are a few degrees cooler.

Say what you want about spring and summer—this is a great time for largemouth bass fishing. The bass are hungry, they're often around shallow structure, and they cooperate by attacking a variety of baits including topwaters, crankbaits, spinnerbaits and some plastic.

There is, however, one long hiccup that can occur around "Real Fall" that makes fishing lousy. Most manmade lakes go through a nasty period of indigestion called "turnover." Turnover occurs in stratified lakes when the warm water on the surface mixes with the cool water on the bottom. As turnover takes place, the algae near the bottom rises to the surface. Depending on the lake's water quality, this can

produce a thick pea soup or just a dusting of green confetti. Depending on the weather, turnover can occur quickly, its effects gone in three or four days, or it can last nearly two weeks. Whether it occurs closer to "First Fall" or "Real Fall," you may as well stay home during turnover. Most bass are not going to bite.

Real Fall patterns

Even though Real Fall often produces good numbers of largemouth bass, the fish can be in many moods. To catch 'em, you have to match their moods.

During "Real Fall," bass anglers should work some key structure with common, but effective, approaches. Key locations during this time are beds of verdant weeds and the outside edges of weed lines. So, too, are creek channels and flats, and coves, or bays, with tributary creeks. I know this covers a lot of territory, but it excludes deep water, the inside edge of most weed lines, mid-lake structure and weedless shallows.

During Real Fall, largemouths are capable of many forms of behavior. On any given day, they'll feed on the surface or hug tight to the bottom. They'll also gulp a variety of prey, including but not limited to crayfish, alewives and gizzard shad.

Real Fall fish might feed only in the morning, or they might wait until the sun comes up to begin a day-long blitz. Generally, late-evening and night fishing are winding down by mid-October, so you can rule this out.

Yet, this variety of time, place and food source makes the season a challenge to bass anglers. When putting a First Fall pattern together, this is how I might proceed through the day.

Happily, I don't have to start my fishing at 5 or 5:30 in the morning. During Real Fall, you can be on the lake by 6 or 6:30, at sunrise, and be confident you haven't missed anything.

If it's a weekday outing, the first place I fish is around the docks and ramp where a weekend tournament was held. Fish dumped there often stay there for a few days.

I look for ramps with weed growth surrounding dropoffs beside the ramps, and any rip-rap abutting the modified structure. My first lure is a buzzbait, followed by a

shallow-running spinnerbait. However, I'll give these up after a few casts around the ramp to work a medium-running crankbait. This should be a killer in this situation. Run the bait so it parallels the edges of the ramp, particularly in five to eight feet of water. Also let the crankbait contact the nearby weeds, and when you feel the lure grab a stalk, pull it gently away from the grass. In this place, don't rip it out of the weeds, as you should in weed beds away from the tournament ramp.

After working the tournament area, fish any beds a few hundred yards away from the prize spot. My lures here are again a buzzbait and shallow-running spinnerbait, either a double Colorado blade or a dual Indiana/Colorado. Unlike the ramp zone, I'll work these baits for a greater time, pulling the buzzbait over open pockets and tossing the spinnerbait in openings and parallel to the outer weed line.

In the first hour or so of a late-dawning morn, I'll use buzzers and spinners over and outside of every weed bed I can find. But here's a trick. Say you get a ring on a buzzbait, but the fish doesn't answer the phone. Immediately toss a five-inch finesse worm or a jig and trailer into the area where the blowup occurred. Make a soft presentation and work the baits slowly and carefully. Only when you have thoroughly probed the strike area should you move on with the buzzbait/spinnerbait combo.

After breakfast

By now, the sun will be a bit higher. Let's imagine you're fishing a crystal-clear Real Fall day, blue skies, practically cloudless. The weedbeds are still choice real estate, but now begin to look for "weeds plus." "Weeds plus" includes weeds plus rocks, or weeds plus points, or points with rocks and some weeds.

Earlier the bass were spread out, but with the sun climbing higher, I expect the better fish to find choice ambush spots. The quality fish have vacated sparse weed beds and moved to sites where there is deeper, and darker, cover. I don't mean deep water as, say, over 12 or 15 feet. I mean places where a boulder sits near weeds, or a sloping point offers additional protection.

There are two ways to play this mid-morning game. The first is to flip jigs and trailers at choice sites. With this you get close to your target and probe the best locations. It's a very good tactic. But for discussion's sake, let's look at another gambit that isn't usually covered. This encompasses staying away from your target and making long, at least 40-foot, casts with a variety of crankbaits.

I like this trick because it keeps me hidden from bass I bet have gone through a blitzkrieg summer. Understand also that just because I'm not flipping close to the target, it doesn't mean I'm not target-casting.

Instead of making pinpoint presentations, I'm running a bait around and through pinpoint locations. These include those old Real Fall favorites noted before, but this time, the baits are not clawing the surface. Instead, they're at suspended depths, or along the bottom.

The lure kit for this game fills a tackle shop wall. It includes a variety of shallow- to medium-running crankbaits, suspending crankbaits, suspending stickbaits and those all-important lipless triangle-shaped rattling crankbaits. Covering the latter, don't forget the new suspending models some manufacturers are producing. When you stop the retrieve on suspending lipless cranks, the bait hovers. Contacting an obstruction, pull the bait away, and then let it sit for a few ticks of the clock. Before resuming the retrieve, give the rod tip a nod or two to inch the bait along. After the nods, power pack the restart and be ready for a hard strike. Do this with all suspending baits.

Around noon is the tough time during Real Fall. A lot of bass that have been feeding all morning now just shut off. Of course, there are still fish to be caught, but the bite is limited.

With the sun high, I go to working laydowns reaching out to deep water, at least 7 feet, preferably 7 to 12. Now's the time for the stout rod, jig and pig, or jig and plastic trailer. The game is to probe the outer branches with slow lifts and falls. Sometimes I also dig crankbaits into deep-holding laydowns and that produces a few good fish. But instead of spending time on jig and pig techniques, let's push the clock ahead a few hours to 3 to 5 p.m.

Some days it happens, some days it doesn't, but when it does you're in for a memorable experience. I'm talking about an afternoon schooled bite. Through the course of the day, the bass have gathered around a pod of baitfish. The gamers may have followed the bait about, or the bait just carelessly moved into dangerous ground. It doesn't matter. What happens is that as the day grows old, the bass start attacking the pod. They dash into the

baitfish and start picking them off. The shad, alewives, perch or whatever get chased up. The angler, if he's alert, notices a series of swirls on the surface. The action comes and goes.

Overall, the best area to find this activity is in the middle of coves or bays, or out in the main lake. Again, that's a lot of territory, but the marauding schools can go anywhere.

To fish these movable feasts, you have to be very careful. If you drive your boat into the swirls, say good-bye. It's better to get within casting range quietly, and then keep off the trolling motor. If the swirls stop, don't go gunning around. Wait. The underwater struggle is being played out and the surface activity should reappear, probably in the same general area.

Try these real tricks while you're out in Real Fall, and I hope you have a real good time. ☐

