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Monster Hunt: Ledge Lunker Blues

By Originally published in Procats Online Magazine

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Summertime angling for trophy-sized blue cats on huge reservoirs can be tough. Peer across an expansive lake and the sheer vastness will seemingly swallow you whole. Where do you start? Do you just go out and look around with a good locator and hope to see some arches and begin fishing? Based on past experiences you know two things. Sometimes you have to drift. Other times you'll have to anchor. How do you know which to do first and what types of structure are you looking for that will hold big burly blue cats?

Procat pro-staffer Jeff Williams ardently targets big blues on Truman Reservoir and Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri. A lifetime of big-lake catfishing has taught him a thing or two about catfish behavior in reservoirs, and according to Jeff you can put more fish into the boat if you learn a few keys to summertime blue cat location. Before we get into the fishing part let's look at the two lakes Jeff fishes.

Lake Ledges

Many lakes around the country have different bottom styles from sheer drops down into as much as 180 foot of water on canyon terrain reservoirs, to relatively shallow featureless bowls with subtle drops in depth. Not all lakes are built alike but trophy-sized blues behave in similar ways wherever they swim – especially when it comes to relating to the same types of cover and depth according to the season you are fishing.

Ledge Blues

While Jeff targets cats in a variety of situations during the summer period, he reports that during the warm-water post-spawn period, drift fishing is in his most productive pattern for most days on both lakes for numbers of fish.

He looks for areas where the bottom has subtle rises and drops going from just below and well above the thermocline. "During the hotter water period, the thermocline is everything." Jeff uses his locator to mark fish on gently sloping ledges with the right depth before he deploys his

baits and begins a drift. "You can find fish holding on steep ledges in the summer but steep ledges are difficult to get the right drift to stay in contact with numbers of fish. I prefer gentle rises and drops in a long diverse bottom contour area. Once you catch a few fish, make a note at what depth you're catching them in. If you're catchin' fish in 16 foot of water around a 12 foot hump - you'd better find some more 16 foot of water to drift around in."

Why Drift During Summer

Jeff anchor fishes ledges, flats, trenches, wood cover, and steep drops during most of the year except during the hot-water post-spawn period. Big blues will hold on specific cover part of the time and roam around in tight areas looking for food before relocating during the cooler months which allows him to set up on a good number of fish. He still has to look for fish with his finder during the colder water periods but once he finds them, he can anchor up and fish a specific area. Jeff's theory about blue cat metabolism may hold the key to understanding why he does better while drift fishing during summer and the opposite during the cooler water period.

"I think as the water gets hotter, their metabolism rises with it and the blues need to roam around searching for food a lot more. It seems that I have to move around a lot more as well so I drift over areas targeting the active fish and don't worry about fish holding in one area. In hot water, when the fish are active - I can set up on them and by the time I've caught a few fish they've moved. When the fish are acting this way I feel like I've made the right choice by

drifting."

The Controlled Drift

Jeff admits that drift fishing for blues isn't really targeting big fish specifically, but he is still targeting structure that holds big fish. He finds an area that is showing the right drift scenario according to his experience on his lakes. He looks for fish arches on his locator holding the right distance off the bottom according to the thermocline. He likes to see fish on the graph holding either really close to the bottom. "Somebody out there might have some success with these loosely suspended fish but I haven't done well trying to target them yet."

Make sure to read Part 2 of this article to learn more about catching monster ledge lunker blues!

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Settin' It Up

Once Jeff has picked his area by marking the right bottom contour near the thermocline and the right space between the fish and the bottom, he is ready to deploy the drift socks. Williams will usually only use one drift sock or "sea anchor" to set his drift at the right speed and path. Some anglers use two anchors out the side of the boat but Jeff prefers to drift with the socks either out the front or the back to get a more controlled drift. If the wind is moving at a fairly good clip, Jeff will fish from the front so the wind doesn't push his boat too fast. If the wind is fairly slow, he will fish from the back so the wind has more of a flat surface to push on, thus speeding up his drift. Jeff notes that he will catch more fish if he speeds up or slows down the drift when he needs to cover more or less water. Also of note is that matching the speed of the boat to the activity level of the fish seems to work best on certain days. "You just have to fish and vary your drift speed till you start hookin' up with fish. I like to start with a certain drift speed and then go faster or slower from there."

If Jeff is catching fish fairly consistently he will leave the boat speed alone. If he goes very far without a hook-up and he is still marking fish on the graph, he will slow down or speed up if he thinks it is necessary. On windless days, Jeff will use his bow-mounted trolling motor to create a drift.

Fresh Bait

Jeff says that one of the most important parts of his fishing success is having fresh bait all day long. He motors to areas that hold shad such as bays, and cuts, and then moves slowly around till he locates schools of shad on his sonar unit. From the front of the boat, he throws a 16-foot diameter 1-inch mesh cast net and usually gets enough bait fairly quick. As soon as he nets the first few gizzard shad he tosses them into a top-quality aerated oval bait tank made by Grayline. After he has caught enough big shad he drains the water out of the tank then refills it. "If I want

the freshest bait possible I have to get the water changed. When shad get stressed they regurgitate and their stomach acids build up in the tank's water and burn their gills. By

changing the water, you remove all that and the built-in tank filters will do the rest."

Williams uses either chunks or fillets depending on what works the best for that day. He makes sure to cut the chunks at an angle so they are streamlined enough not to spin much.

Ready to Go

We've got the right bait and figured out where to fish and set up the boat for the right drift by deploying the drift sock according to the power of the wind. Now its time to look at Jeff's drift rig set-up. Jeff has experimented with many different snagless sinker styles including bottom-bouncers, weighted welding rods, modified egg sinker rigs, pencil weights, and others but he has finally decided on one that works best for him. He ties a short piece of 20 pound monofilament onto a small snap swivel then threads on eight ½ ounce egg sinkers onto the line and then fastens the last one to the line.

You're Ready

Well, there you have it folks. Jeff's simple yet effective summertime pattern he uses to catch blue cats on reservoirs can be used on lots of big lakes across the country. Get out there and drift, pay close attention to what's happening while you're on the water drifting and you'll be catching blues like he does in no time. Chances are if you spend the time on a lake that has some monster-sized blues, you may be surprised just how big a fish you can handle!

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