

PENCIL POPPIN'

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I could see the rip gradually develop into what I knew was good water. I had waited as patiently as someone with the patience of a kid in the candy store could. The water swept past the tip of the rock pile and into the open ocean. It was a perfect bass hold and many times had held some nice prizes. The thing I liked most about it was that it was a good 60-70 yards off and only heavy plugs could get out to where an offering need to be to get the attention of the bass that were set up in the rip waiting for forage to be swept towards them in the strong current. It was one of those "secret" spots, because any average surf caster would just plug the edge of the rocks routinely with far smaller results, this particular venture required long casts and big plugs, enter the pencil popper.

The water became prime. The perfect time for assaults, both by bass, on helpless baitfish, and surfcasters on hungry bass. I walked into the water, put on my yellow Gibbs pencil popper and heaved it into the crisp fall morning. I worked the popper vigorously acrossed the surface. It didn't take long before I could see the a large swirl behind my popper and within seconds saw my popper disappear below the surface as my line went taught. I set back on a striper and the fight was on.

Without any question the age old pencil popper is one of the great bass producers of all time. The pencil popper evolution began in the 1940's. With no mass produced lures on the saltwater market, broomsticks were whittled and shaped and with the head cut at an angle one of the great surface commotion lures was born. These lures where an off shoot from freshwater lures like the Zara Spook. One of the first uses of the pencil popper was in the Cape Cod canal, where long casts into fast moving currents were necessary. These were quickly perfected by lure makers such as Stan Gibbs and where put into mass production and are still one of the best pencil poppers today. Many cows every year still fall victim to these must-haves.

A great weapon not only for the surface commotion and flutter it causes, thus attracting fish of substance, but it is also a great lure for distance. When covering water is important. The more water that you can cover the better your chances. The pencil popper along with the other "woods" of old have yielded to the newer plastics, but are still dynamo lures all the same, history doesn't lie. Personally I find the super surface strikes irresistible. Thus I enjoy the surface swimmers that include steel lipped swimmers, needlefish, polaris poppers, and pencil poppers. The only modern lure that gives you similar surface action would be a Cotton-Cordell "Smokey Joe," along with of course the plethora of plastic poppers.

THE SET UP.

When I fish the skinny waters I do not fish exclusively with pencils, I will work them into a plug rotation, until I find a plug that is working for that particular location and session. In New England, casters will fish exclusively with pencil poppers. They have custom rods that are specialized for pencils, with long butts and high cork wraps up the rod to where there right hand sits while retrieving. Poppin' is always done with spinning gear as well.

When plugging I usually use a graphite stick because I need a light set up for sustained sessions, but for penciling a good rod would be a S-Glass SSB 136M cut down to 10'. When using pencil poppers you need a relatively long rod, that is not too stiff. You need a "looser" rod to help give your popper the maximum action. The lighter the rod would also benefit you, for poppin' takes a lot out of your upper body. The smallest I would use would be an 8' 6", the longest probably around 11', it would depend on your performance and what feels good for you. A longer butt comes in handy. It gives you more to clench onto between the knees and gives you a better sense as to positioning of the butt w/out looking down after every cast. Short butts are ineffective and shouldn't be used.

The reel would vary on what you like but it would have to be one of the larger reels. It has to hold a lot of line. I use either a Penn 704 Z or a Shimano Stradic 5000. Line wise I like 50 lb. Power Pro. I like to spool up with about 225 yards. Some of the casts that you will make may very well travel over 100 yds. So you have to figure if a good fish hits you on the end of your cast and then runs 50 yards, you still have a very good shot at the fish.

THE TECHNIQUE.

The technique that is used with pencil poppers is like no other. When done correctly it presents an almost irresistible call to bass or blues any where in the nearby vicinity. The flipping, darting, splashing action imitates a wounded panicking baitfish. The predator strikes on sheer instinct.

When casting you want to cast out and then immediately put your rod butt between your legs. Tighten up on the rod butt with your legs or knees, keep your reel at about belt level. The butt end of the rod is going to act as a fulcrum or an unmovable base, thus giving you the ability to really whip the top of your rod. Your left hand will reel as it usually does, but your right hand instead of holding your reel at the reel seat will grab onto the rod around 12-18" above the reel. Once your lure hits the water take up your slack and grab your rod high. With your right hand you will shake the rod forwards and backwards quickly and violently. At the same time reeling as slowly as possible, yet keeping your line relatively tight. Your popper should dart left and right, dance and splash similar to a Zara Spook but on a much larger scale.

TIPS

Pencil poppers and popper are my favorite way to catch bass or blues. I would rather take one fish on top to ten off metal or plugs, I just find the surface action so much more fulfilling. One day this spring I was fishing Wasque Point where me and a buddy where ended up catching small blues in the absence of bass, it was due to the season slow start. While one caster was getting blues on metal on almost every cast, my buddy and I went with the pencils and had a great time watching the blues coming up and wacking our poppers.

Now a few things that will help make your penciling more fun. When doing a lot of penciling, don't feel that you have to grip your rod real tight with your right hand. A real light grip will keep your arm from cramping up. Endurance and longevity need to be considered. I often times also find myself using the pencil technique while using standard poppers. The positioning of the arms is different than plugging thus giving your arm a break from repetition overuse.

A very important thing to remember on the retrieve is to never stop your poppers movement or action. Even if suddenly you see a big swirl or a dorsal fin rise behind your plug. One day I saw, an inexperienced caster throwing a pencil out into good bass water and every time a bass would rise and hit the popper the guy would stop reeling. At one point a bass knocked the popper 5 feet out of the water, straight up in the air...I stood and stared in amazement, while the caster, after another fishless retrieve, packed up his equipment and left, I would guess in frustration. Go figure. I went on to put up three bass in the mid-teens in the next half hour from his spot.

Another important thing to keep in mind is that you don't need to reel very fast, but do need to keep your popper slapping furiously. You don't want the cow to get a good look at the wood. I actually try to reel as slow as I can while still getting the maximum shaking action from my popper. You don't want to jerk or slide the popper like you may do with other surface lures, you want your lure to be surrounded by splashing water. The cow will strike it with a vengeance, I'm not sure if it is out of hunger or out sheer aggravation, that is not as important as the strike and the battle that ensues. The excitement and rush is unmatched in any sport!