

Pencil Poppin' Cow Bass

By DJ Muller

I drove like a madman down the dead end street and hit the brakes hard. I threw on the parking brake and jumped out my truck and ran to the bluff and looked hard into the afternoon brine. Was it what I thought it was? I searchingly probed the area of water just off the rocks and hoped that what I thought I observed from a quarter mile down was in fact...a bunker school!!! This time of year, it is very productive for you to keep a close eye on these shallow water developments. Should a bunker school surface somewhere close to shore, it is then time for you to move instantly into action. If you snooze, you loose. It is that simple. As it is so often the case on this particular search, I came up empty and my wonderment was only illusional. But I am not easily deterred!

When the large schools of adult bunker visit the shallows, they are seldom alone in the spring, let alone anytime for that matter. Bass of the largest kind follow these schools and when the opportunity presents itself, they will attack these schools with vicious assaults in an attempt at a delicious, high protein meal. At times like these, surfcasters need to be especially vigilant and patient for the rewards of big bass await them.

As I previously stated, big bunker and big bass go hand-in-hand. For the surfcaster big bunker and pencil poppers need to go hand-in-hand, and between you and me, the bigger the pencil the better. The pencil popper action causes big stripers to believe that a bunker has just broken away from its school and it is making a mad-dash across the surface in search of safe harbor some where. Bass see it as a golden opportunity, as a lone, wounded bunker makes for easy pickings. The bass are drawn by the sound of the splashing, spitting water; they perceive it as a creature in distress. They hone in on the sound until they get a visual. Then they attack. The thing I like about the pencil popper is that it never allows the fish a good look at the offering. As it slides and splashes along the surface at a fair clip, bass will worry more about competing with other bass for it, rather than checking to see if it looks like a real bunker or a piece of painted wood with hooks in it..

I was searching last June for schools of bunker close to the beach. I happened down this road and upon coming into full view of the beach I immediately noticed a school of big bunker moving quickly down the beach just beyond the last wave. Big bass were crashing through the school periodically sending one to two pound bunker and white water, spraying into the air. I quickly sized up the situation and looked for a spot where I could you know like John Wayne would say, "Head them off at the pass." I saw that down the beach a couple hundred yards was a jetty. Bingo! I wasted no time in getting to that jetty ahead of the school and it played into my hands perfectly.

Almost perfectly I should say. Much to my surprised there was another surfcaster, a fellow named Jason, there already and I did not want to stifle him but I needed that spot to cast, so I said as calmly as possible, "Do you mind if I fish here too." He gave me the green light and the fun began. He cast a pencil first into the arriving school and was on almost immediately. He jumped down off the jetty and headed down the beach with his fish. I cast and worked my pencil back in but no result. I began to sweat and wonder, perhaps panic a bit. But on the next cast it was all forgotten, I was crashed in no uncertain terms. The rod went down and the dragged peeled out. I moved away from the jetty also

as the fish ran into deep water instead of into the rocks (lucky me!). By this time Jason was just beaching his fish, it went about 22 pounds, a nice fish by any standard. After giving me a good battle I finally took the upper hand on my bass, it went almost 30 pounds. It was a great feeling of sweat and adrenaline. Jason and I high-fived each other and we have since become friends. We both tried again, but the school had continued to move quickly and disappeared. Remember these schools often times move very quickly and you need to strike while the opportunity is in front of you, you can not dabble. When the time comes to throw big lures to big bass bring the right equipment. Shooting an elephant in the butt with a slingshot will not get you very far neither will trying to throw a 3 ½ ounce Gibbs pencil popper, 100 yards to cow bass with a 9' Tica rod. Last year I fished beside a guy that was trying to throw the correct pencil with an undersized rod. He was getting very little distance on his cast not even coming close to his target. Go with a good quality 10' foot stick rated for up to four ounces. The St. Croix Avid ASRS100MS or the Lamiglas MS101XS are both exceptional rods for this type of action. Reels have got to be large capacity reels with decent drag systems. I personally am a Van Staal guy; I load up with 300-400 yards of 50 pound braid when cow-hunting. When throwing pencils from rocky shorelines or jetties I use an 80 pound test leader, mostly for handling purposes when trying to drag a big fish up onto the rocks or sliding it out of the wash, it saves you on nasty cuts to the back of your hand. Forever I have used the Gibbs 3 ½ ounce pencil popper when big bas and bunker show up. White has always been good to me. But there are other great pencils that I really like. One of the newer ones on the market is made by Rich Karpowicz and PlugCaster Lures. These are well engineered and they cast great. I used it last year and I liked both the casting distance and the action on the retrieve, both of which are so important. Big Don also makes a killer pencil, as does NJ plug builder Gene Amato with his dynamite Fish On lures, which are starting to really catch on, on the Cape.

Be ready and be vigilant for when the bunker schools pay visit to our warming spring waters. Find a school and go to work with the pencil and draw a titan from the deep. Try not to panic when you see that big wake behind your popper and the charges of a big fish that will soon have you on a pure adrenaline high. Best of luck! See you out there.

Photo Caption: Brian Biedinger took advantage of the bunker-bass combination last spring when he whacked this 43 pound striper on a Fish On pencil popper.