

“Plugging vs. Bait: Know When to Say When.”

By DJ Muller

When it comes time to fish the surf, it is very important for you as a surf fisherman to know when is the right time to present the correct offering to hungry predators. I know some pluggers that don't even know how to spell the word-bait, and I know a couple of bait guys that think a plug is something that goes in the bottom of a bath tub. It is no secret that the two sides have been battling for years as to which is the most effective way of catching striped bass. Both sides think that their way is the only way. The arguments have gone on and on. Is bait more productive than artificials? Are artificials the only “real” way to catch bass? Which of the two is the best way to catch bass?

Well the truth of the matter is, when you really get down to it, is that these two old adversaries do not need to fight against each other but rather do rather well working together helping to make caster, the most productive caster possible. These two aspects of catching bass, work best, hand in hand. I preach it and will continue to preach it fervently. To be a successful caster you must be flexible. You must be able to change your approach as the conditions around you change. There are times when fishing bait can be lights out, while at other times fishing artificials will take the vast majority of the fish. It is up to you as the surfcaster to determine when the time is right for either. Your judgement will mean the difference between success and failure.

I was down at Island Beach State Park last year getting in on some of that great fall fishing as bass and blues were wreaking havoc on helpless peanut bunker and spearing that were seeking skinny water as a refuge. It was one of those “better” days if you know what I mean. The buggies were “leap frogging” to the front of the schools, heading them off, and casters were setting up where they would wait for the approaching school, as they made their way quickly south. At one spot that I had stopped I was hitting some fish real good. I couldn't help but notice the large number of bait fishermen that still had their bait rigs out in the water. Here we were casting poppers and shads to hungry schools of bass and blues, and hooking up on every properly placed cast, while the bait guys sat watching almost helplessly. As the pluggers moved down the beach and the bait guys stayed dormant. I was really scratching my head when I saw a bait guy grab his rod from his spike reel it in quickly and run up to his spot. I thought to myself, now that guy is doing the right thing!! I can't tell you how surprised I was to see him run back down, between pluggers, and cast a fresh clam into the melee. I lingered and watched with interest for a short time to see the result, needless to say he went without a bump while all surrounding pluggers continued to engage fish. To think that some hungry, supposed bass fisherman, would go to the waters edge in November, with out being prepared for what might be, or what will likely be, leaves me very befuddled and confused. These are guys that will sit on their buckets for hours, days, or weeks waiting for a fish or two, when breaking fish right out in front of them are left unfazed. This type of fishing, I still haven't figured out.

Now to the contrary, two Octobers ago I was clamming a hole in Brick beach with good results. The large schools of bait had not yet started moving south with earnest. I was fishing one evening before dark, when two or three guys pulled up beside me and started plugging. I'm sure they were geared up for the good plug fishing of fall, all ready to knock fish on artificials. But the time was not right yet for artificials. They had put the cart in front of the horse. In the next 45 minutes, I went crazy putting 6 bass up on the beach, the pluggers did nothing. Now, as any of us would do, I was right back to the same spot the next evening in anticipation of another deluge of bass. I had my clams ready. Again, much to my surprise, the same pluggers again showed up and again right beside me. To my surprise, without bait! Again I put fish on the beach (not as many) as they went fishless. There inability to adapt cost them fish. When you get time to fish, you want to catch fish. Don't you? I do. Be open minded and observant, try hard not to force something that you want to work when some thing other is working. When bass are feeding on the bottom, fish the bottom. If the are feeding on top or in the middle of the water column, make your presentations there. Keep an open mind and adapt to conditions and you will be a very happy surfcaster.

If bait fishing is your thing, fine. But when the blitz fishing of fall presents itself to you on a golden platter, don't miss the dinner bell when it ring because you are stuck in a concrete rut. Give the hungry blue or bass what it is seeking. Have a bag of plastics or a piece of metal, or a popper ready. When the great fall blitz fishing has yet to develop, and the bass are still adhering to summer patterns, don't be afraid to go to bait. The use of bait can may times far supercede the use of artificials. There are times of the season when bait is the way to score fish, while at other times artificials are the only logical way to put bass on the beach.

In your quest to be a better surfcaster, open your mind and disregard your bad habits and partake in some of the fine surf fishing that is offered to you. Carry out your garbage when you go and good luck.