

The Good Woods of Fall

By DJ Muller

Do you know of any surfcaster that can sit still as the summer wanes; as the summer visitors pack up their cars and trucks and head for the parkway north? I don't. As we all know Labor Day, which I personally declare as my favorite holiday, kicks off the fall run. The migration begins in earnest in September in New England, then sizzles in October. Here in Jersey, we defrost in September, start cooking in October, and have an all out Bar-B-Que finale in November.

As I stand in my garage, looking at all the lures I have hanging there and trying to decide what my "starting line-up" for the fall run will be, it seems that my hand first and foremost always falls on the woods. I love the wood swimmers like the Gibbs Danny, The Big Don, the Lefty, Basswood, and others. I love the numerous poppers, both pencils and Polaris made by Gibbs. There is nothing more gratifying than seeing a bass or blue come up on one with a sudden burst of speed and blow the lure clear out of the water. I have many memories attached to each plug as it hangs there waiting for its turn. Engrained in my mind are wild days and great fish hitting woods. It is no wonder I can't wait for September.

Wood plugs have been around for as long as there have been men going to the waters edge and throwing something other than bait to fish in an effort to persuade them to bite. As the technology of rod and reel has improved, it has made the casting of artificials a much easier thing to do. The wood swimmer was on the scene early as was the wood popper, many of these where garage or basement built. Creek Chub was one of the first to produce both the swimmer in the form of the Pokie, and the still popular Creek Chub popper, for saltwater. These plugs were great fish catchers then, and still are today. As I have developed as a surfcaster, I have on several occasions realized that I carry no plastics in my surfbag. This always strikes me funny because when I first began, I carried nothing but. I would carry about six Bombers, one in every color, and a couple Atom poppers, with a couple Hopkins Shorty's for good measure. Now it seems like it is all wood, swimmers and poppers, with rubber shads and still metal thrown in for good measure.

The Arsenal. Please let me present my arsenal, and my justifications for the use of each. My first choice is wood swimmers. They are what I go to first. I will have two basic colors, white and yellow, and three different sizes. 4", 5", and 6". I will also keep a 5-6" chartruse swimmer handy for low-light and murky-water situations where super high visibility is a must.

Next I will carry a yellow or white, (or blue, during the mullet run) 2 ¼ ounce Gibbs, Polaris popper, and an either white or yellow 2 ounce Gibbs pencil popper.

To round out the bag, I like shads in 4", 5", and 6", and of course a Hopkins in 2 ¼-3 ounces.

Justifications.

The wood swimmers are deadly in the skinny waters, because fish laying in ambush points, sitting in holes, or on the prowl, are looking for wounded, helpless baitfish. This lazy surface hugging, feeble-looking, steel-lipped swimmer makes for an easy target.

The Polaris popper I like for the distance they provide, especially in windy conditions where you absolutely need the extra yardage on your cast in order to hit schools of rolling bass just beyond the break. Needless to say the squishing and gurgling sounds and action, brings anxious, inquiring fish.

The pencil popper now, that is something special. I use it in a condition where fish are not prevalent, but are in the vicinity. The constant whipping and splashing of the pencil calls fish in from long distance and draws devastating strikes.

The shads I like because they cast far and get down into the strike zone very quick. The metal is great when you have breaking fish at a good distance and you need to reach them. This is almost the only time I will throw metal. Like I said...I love the visual of topwater strikes.

Strategy.

Both of the poppers mentioned previous, I will also use at slower periods when there is not a lot happening. I call it my one-two punch. I start with a popper cast three times to an area, I will then quickly switch over to a swimmer or a shad and every so often, it will take a fish. I feel that the popper draws the fish to within your range. The splashing and noise however may be too much excitement for the fish to commit to. Suddenly the fish sees an innocent, poor, little, helpless, baitfish swim past and BOOM, they can not refuse the easy meal. You happily have a productive session.

As successful as a popper is, it is not usually the first wood that I reach for. When I walk up onto a beach or jetty, I try to approach it quietly and without commotion. I like to start by throwing a medium-sized steel-lipped in to the calm water to see if any nice bass lie in wait. Once I feel that I have worked the area over pretty good. I will go to the poppers, causing more commotion, trying to draw a strike. Once I have worked that area to where I feel I have been thorough, I will move on down the beach, or to the next jetty and begin the process all over again.