

The author of the new book *Challenge of the Trout*
faces the "challenge of the bass"

The Snap-Crackle Poppers

GARY LAFONTAINE

GEORGE REBER POLED THE FLATBOAT under the drapings of moss and limbs. He shoved the nose among the hyacinth tangles of the slough, mumbling and muttering advice after each plopping cast. "Watch out," he grunted, "because every now and then a snake drops down."

I peered into the branches. "What kind of snake?"

"Can't tell. One shows up, you'll see the record for a fat man getting out of a boat."

The backwater of Florida's St. John's River was stained brown with the tannic leaching of the cypress roots. On fallen logs in the shallows the turtles and alligators sat in unflinching repose, or often with just the bumps of the eyes humped above the surface of that languid puddle.

"That fuss-stick," he jabbed a finger toward the fly rod. "You use it a lot?"

"Most of the time."

"When you were a kid, you were hell on fish with those pork-rind chunks."

"I use flies now most of the time."

"They're not working now," he grumbled. "You're ruining my reputation as a guide."

GEORGE CONTINUED TO TALLY a number of bass on his golden shiners, even though he steered the boat into the best spots for the fly rod, but he missed other strikes on the minnows while he watched the gentle twitching of my popper.

During the sunshine of the afternoon the cork bug fooled only small bass and ambitious bluegills. The subtle "twitch-and-wait" technique of retrieving failed to attract the 3- to 5-pound largemouths hidden in the weeds.

I stuck too doggedly to a bass fishing maxim: slow and easy in the middle of the day—fast and noisy in the morning or the evening.

After two hours I began to try different poppers and varying retrieves. I chugged a black scoop-face lure more and more vigorously until finally this hissing and gurgling fusser busted a decent bass from the vegetation.

I warmed up to this active technique slowly—like a shy dancer in a Conga line—but I hooked fish quicker with each increase of sputtering noise. I began to catch

bass faster on the poppers than George was catching them on his minnows.

"You're hot," he laughed.

"It doesn't make any sense, George." I respooled the reel with a sink-tip line and reattached the noise-making bug. "But we'll go all the way with it."

I dropped the popper beyond a stump, letting it sit until the sinking fly line sagged and tugged the lure down. Then with a full-arm haul I stripped line and drove the popper under in an explosion of air bubbles. When it bounced back to the surface, I hurried it along with a fast retrieve.

"Right," George agreed. "That'll shake up everything in the river."

I knew how foolish a ploy for night-time casting might seem on a hot spring day in Florida, but I repeated this favorite trick. "It's crazy," I confessed.

The lure chugged under in a clear patch of water next to the shore. It floated up and skittered off, trailing a tail of bubbles through the weeds. "Look out," George warned.

I saw the wake of a hustling fish pushing aside the hyacinth mats. I kept the lure moving, but I watched the disturbance that spread so visibly as the large bass broke into the open channel.

I hooked the fish when it engulfed the lure ("Hog, hog!" George yelled), but then I let it turn its head back down into the weed stems. I held on then while George pulled up clumps of green and chased the bass into the free water.

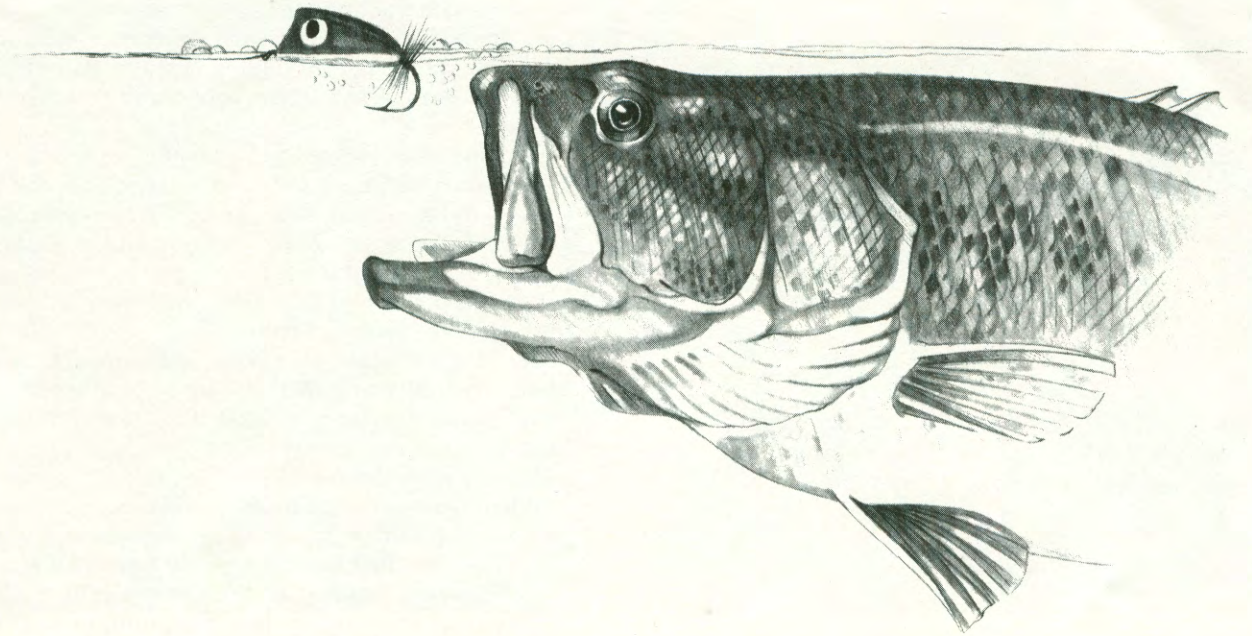
He scooped the 6½-pound fish with a boat net. "Look at you, boy," he railed. "You've even forgot how to hustle a 'hog.'"

I pulled a beer from the ice chest and sat down, grinning and whooping, "What do you think of the fly rod?"

He motioned toward the surrounding confusion of snags. "I didn't think it would work here."

Maybe by the end of the afternoon the steady action with the flies made George forget the bygone glory of my pork-chunk days. Maybe the versatile popper made him understand why the fly rod is applicable whenever bass are within range of the surface.

THE ORIGINAL CORK BUGS, simple bottle-stoppers with sparse wings of bucktail, were tied in 1907 by E. H.



Illustrations by Bill Elliott

Peckinpaugh of Tennessee. These first patterns were designed for bluegills and equipped with appropriately small, English double-hooks. Peckinpaugh also wrote about the adaptation of the lures to bass-bugging:

There was practically no further development in these bugs until 1910 or 1911. I am uncertain about which year. Anyway, at this particular time, my work as a contractor kept me pretty busy and the jobs were always so far away from home that they interfered considerably with my usual periods of fishing. By the time I arrived at one of the lakes or ponds where I usually fished, it would be just about dark, so I was compelled to fish at night. I then discovered that bass would strike the same bugs which I had been using for bream. But the hook was small and I lost most of the fish. This inspired me to make a larger edition of the double hook bugs, and inasmuch as they were developed for night fishing, I called them 'Night Bugs.'

Two anglers who took an early interest in the Peckinpaugh bugs were B. F. Wilder and Will H. Dilg. They were so highly successful with both the original prototype and new versions of the lure that they later created, in conjunction with well-known Chicago tier Cal MacCarthy, a series known as the "Mississippi Patterns."

Dilg wrote extensively about fly-rodding for bass in the sloughs of the upper Mississippi River in Minnesota. Through his articles in *Field & Stream* he explained the new art of "bugging" to a nation of anglers.

Cal MacCarthy later developed the hump-shank single hook that prevented the cork body from twisting, and this innovation generally replaced the Peckinpaugh double-hook. MacCarthy produced his own series of "Calmac" bugs, the line carried on after his death by the South Bend Company.

The new style of "disturber" cork bugs launched a controversy that raged in the national sporting publications of the day. The older school of thought advocated no retrieve after the cast, with the lure plopped at likely spots and allowed to sit until the next pick-up. The "commotion" theorists, on the other hand, counted on sound rather than the sight-identity of the bug to attract bass.

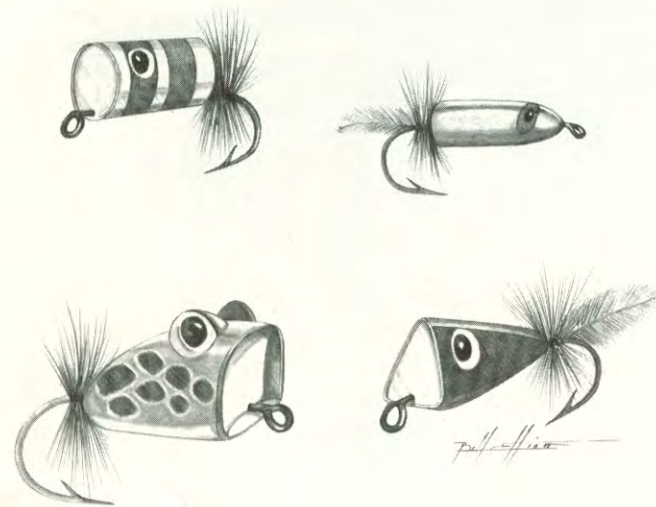
The controversy faded away as fishermen tried the lures on enough different waters to recognize the efficacy of each technique. The art of the bass bug blossomed as anglers learned to match the retrieve and the built-in "fuss" of a lure to the "visibility" of the habitat.

In the years before World War II, the fly rod was recognized as the best approach for casting the shallow margins of a clear-water lake. The nearly weightless cork bugs and hair flies allowed a delicacy of presentation that was not possible with the heavy bait-casting outfits of the era.

ALL SURFACE BUG IMITATIONS ARE BASED, intentionally or not, on the fact that a bass constantly watches for the injured or sick cripples of the environment. These lures are not good representations of exact food-items, but they create a disturbance, even with the slightest movement, that lends the impression of a land or water animal struggling for safety.

- The "quietest" bug is the original flat-face cork. The blunt head pushes a small wave of water in front, sending out muted vibrations. Rubber legs that dangle and quiver even when the lure sits completely still are important additions on this type of attractor.

- The slant-headed cork, with the angle cut back so that the lip digs into the water, imitates a maimed crea-



ture fighting to dive under the surface. The bug squirts down, its feathers or hackle undulating in the rear, only to bob feebly back to the top.

- The bullet-head slider works well in thick, stalk-type weeds such as reeds, bull-rushes, or tules. It pokes its way through the strands without the face catching on the vegetation, wiggling on a steady retrieve like a swimming mouse or shrew.

- The popper-face bug is a noise maker that attracts fish in the dark—or in low-visibility waters like the St. John's. Even at night it is usually best fished with a bit of discretion, a pop and then a pause to allow any bass to find it, but there are also those moments when the fast, chugging retrieve excites bass into a kill-fury.

Bill Seeples and I studied the reactions of bass to different surface teasers at Granite Shoals Lake* in Texas. One of us put on scuba gear and prowled the bottom while the other tossed cork bugs over a mixed school of 2½- to 6-pound fish.

During the middle of the day the bass stayed in a deep sanctuary at 30 feet, a step-ledge at the base of a steep slope, and moved very little until the noon sun left the lake. At 5:00 p.m. they migrated slowly to the cove of Big Sandy Creek, but the school stopped short of the canyon. They spread out over a sunken weed bed in five feet of water at the mouth of the brushy shallows.

Bill cast a scoop-faced popper first, letting it sit momentarily after it landed. He twitched it with a small chug, and then he let it rest again. Finally, he retrieved the lure with a series of regular pops.

When the bug first hit the water, two or three bass homed in on the concentric ripples. They cruised to

within a few feet of the quiet cork and held at this position, but with the first burst of air bubbles from the lure they immediately shied away from the disturbance. When the bug began chugging steadily away they lost any apparent interest in the action and returned to the bottom.

Depending on where the lure landed in relation to the school, different bass moved to investigate the initial splat each time—and each time, in water unbroken by any wind ripples or cloud shadows, the commotion of the bug discouraged the fish.

I surfaced and told Bill about the testy disposition of the bass. "You're too impatient."

We dug through a selection of poppers until we found a scrubby bug with a double set of white rubber legs. "Nothing is going to hit it if it's just sitting there," he insisted.

"Give it five minutes."

When the small cork flopped and spread its legs onto the water, a pair of bass rose up to assume a watchful post. They perched there for nearly four minutes, peering at the faint jiggling of the droopy rubber strands. Then one of the bass, its fins beginning to beat faster, glided forward unhurriedly and sucked down the bug.

Bill caught and returned five of the fish, all of them taken with an amazingly consistent, four-minute "do-nothing" wait, but then he released an injured bass that tried to rejoin the school. Bill failed to catch anything else over the sunken weed bed.

The fish all acted nervous when the bleeding one swam near the group. They stopped grubbing even for natural feed over the bottom and remained agitated until 30 minutes later when they moved up and fanned out over the shallows for an evening spree.

These bugs, from the first splat on the water, are attractors that depend greatly upon the sound vibrations they produce—and in large part this explains moments of both success and failure. But, as sonic attractors, the bugs fill a unique niche in the repertoire of the fly-rod angler; no other "sight" fly attracts bass from such a distance.

And there is no better lure for catching really large bass than surface disturbers. Not even the bottom bumping technique of plastic worms or sinking plugs, so successful on structure-oriented school bass in deep water, produces more lunker fish. As a bass grows older, a "garbage-gut" loner who becomes an indiscriminate hunter, it is the audible and visible helplessness of a bug that represents his prime meal.

The secret with solid-body bugs, whether of cork or modern plastic construction, is understanding the precise nature of each type. Each possesses its own peculiar attraction, depending on the water and light conditions, that forces one of three responses—attack, retreat, or indifference.

For the angler it is often a trial-and-error game of changing bug types and retrieve speeds until the fish respond. It is a search for the balance between attraction and naturalness, the lure needing not only to draw attention but also to appear edible enough to overcome the last-minute caution of the bass. —

*This lake has been officially renamed LBJ Lake, but local anglers still use the older title.

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