

This is the second in a two-part blog concerning lure selection. Part one focused on how to anticipate the feeding mood in speckled trout through understanding how various environmental conditions influence their hunger and aggressiveness. This part focuses on actual lure selection and presentation.

**Color.** I want to get this out of the way up front. Most of the best anglers I know concern themselves little with color selection. The style of bait and presentation are far more important than color. A good example is red/white soft plastics and pink topwaters, two of the most popular lures thrown by legions of Texas anglers.

Science has determined that pink and red lie outside of a speckled trout's color spectrum and appear as simply "black and white" to them. My theory on color is it doesn't matter most of the time. The only instances where I believe it matters are in ultra-clear, shallow water and to a lesser degree in turbid water.

While sight-casting in ultra-clear and shallow water, I've observed "loud" colored lures sometimes spooking fish, whereas they will take a small, clear or light-colored offering.

In turbid water, I like darker baits with fluorescent, contrasting parts, like a plum or black worm with a chartreuse tail. Quite simply, the more aggressive the fish, the less color matters, the more negative the fish, the more color matters. My opinion is that overall, depth and "loudness" are the two most important determining factors in choosing the right lure.

**Depth.** This is the most important factor in determining lure selection. Are the fish feeding high, mid-range or low in the water column? Aggressive fish tend to feed in the upper to middle part of the water column. This situation calls for topwaters or suspending baits which can be presented in the upper part of the water column. Neutral fish are usually staged at or near the bottom and are best targeted with suspending baits fished lower in the water column or with plastic worms. If the fish are negative, your best bet is almost always a soft plastic fished slowly along the bottom.

**Loudness.** I'm not only referring to the actual noise a lure makes, but the overall presence a lure has in the water. Some situations call for less and some for more. In turbid water, you often need a "loud" lure that the fish can find easily. For instance, in turbid water I'll often throw a MirrOlure Catch 5 as opposed to a Paul Brown's FatBoy. The Catch 5 has a louder rattle and comes in flashier colors. If you're fishing plastics in turbid water I'd suggest a contrasting dark/light color pattern with a noise generating paddle tail.

In clear water, you want "just enough" lure for the fish to realize it's there. "More" will often spook the fish. I throw smaller, quieter baits in clear or light colors. Another factor to consider here is the wind. The higher the wind, the "louder" the lure you need for the fish to detect it. For instance, if the wind goes over 20 and I anticipate the trout want a topwater, I'll throw a MirrOlure She Dog as opposed to my usual Rapala Skitterwalk. One school of thought on this subject that I hear from many expert anglers is that a "loud" bait can be used to coax negative fish into biting. They'll throw the loudest

topwater they own during a dead calm, negative bite condition in order to "agitate" the fish into biting. Personally, I've never had success with this and have never seen it done effectively, but enough good anglers buy into it that it's worth mentioning.

The following is a summary of my "go to" baits and an explanation of how I present them. My choices are simply personal preference and this by no means is intended to discount other lures. For years I fished a Heddon Super Spook Junior. This year I went to a Skitterwalk in the junior size. I didn't change because the Spook Junior is suddenly less effective, I simply prefer the way the Skitterwalk moves in the water and it fits better in my small lure box.

**Topwaters.** My primary topwater is a standard Rapala Skitterwalk. If I perceive the need for "less" lure I'll throw a Skitterwalk in the junior size. If I perceive the need for "more" lure I will throw a MirrOlure She Dog. On clear or partly cloudy days, I throw a white or bone topwater. If I have an overcast sky and slightly turbid or worse water clarity, I will throw a black topwater with a chartreuse head.

I'll usually start with my standard retrieve, which is walking the dog back and forth about 8 cycles and letting it sit for about 5 seconds. If no blow ups come, or I get weak interest, I'll start varying the retrieve by either speeding it up or slowing it down, walking the dog for longer cycles and playing with the period of time I pause the lure.

I've had days where I paused the lure for a full 20 count before the fish committed to it. There are also instances where the fish prefer a "speed burst" where you speed the lure across the water in spurts, sometimes coinciding with walking the dog and pauses. The main point is start with a standard retrieve you have confidence in and vary that retrieve until you get aggressive strikes. If no strikes come despite an anticipated topwater bite, or if you're getting blown up without getting hooked up, drop to a suspending bait.

**Suspending plugs.** My "go-to" here is a sinking Paul Brown's FatBoy. For 90% of applications, I throw a simple glow-colored FatBoy. If water clarity is really bad, I'll throw black with a chartreuse head. In instances where I feel I need more of a lure presence in a suspending bait, I have excellent luck with a MirrOlure Catch 5 in chartreuse with gold reflective sides. This is my top bite getter in brown tide. If I need "less", I'll throw a MirrOminnow in silver luminescence/clear.

The beauty of suspending baits is once you master them, you can cover any depth you may encounter while wading a flat and during periods of floating grass, you can bring them in right under the grass where your topwater gets tangled. My typical retrieve is to let the lure settle a second after the cast and walk the dog under the surface about 6 cycles and then pause for a few seconds. During the pause I continue to bring the slack in, preventing the lure from falling and allowing me to stay in contact with the lure. I'll also add a couple of light twitches during the pause to help stay in contact.

As with the topwater, vary your twitches and pauses until you get bit. If you want to fish the bait lower in the water column, simply let it sink more after the cast. One tip is

to put the bait you are actually using in the water and count the number of seconds it takes for it to sink to the desired depth. Use the same count-down after you cast. This is very important with the Catch 5 because their sink rates from the factory can be very inconsistent.

One effective trick to fishing suspending baits during a very windy period is to take a Paul Brown's Original Lure and bend the tail approximately 75 degrees. Work the bait as described above, but with more vigorous twitches. Watching the bait action in my swimming pool reveals that the bait is actually doing a barrel roll, which doesn't really mimic anything I know of, but it is a very effective strike generator in the wind.

**Soft plastics.** I've basically abandoned all soft plastics except for one type in two colors--the MirrOlure 4" Soft Shad in plum/chartreuse and opening night. Occasionally if the water clarity is really bad, I'll throw a black/chartreuse tail. I highly doubt it's any more effective than plum, but it makes me feel more confident. I know I'm in the minority throwing paddle tails over rat tails, but I'm fine with that. I've mixed it up enough that I feel my style works better with a paddle tail.

MirrOlure soft plastics are as flexible as any on the market and incredibly durable. I've fished an entire 2 day trout tournament, landing multiple fish over 25" on the same MirrOlure 5" Provoker without needing to change it due to damage. Catching 30 dinks on the same one isn't uncommon. I'm not sure how MirrOlure accomplishes this, but their "worms" have no equal in my opinion.

The main point about fishing a soft plastic is keeping it in contact with the bottom. Wind and current make this more difficult than most people realize, so you have to be willing to mix up the jighead weights to match various conditions. My go-to jighead is a Bass Assassin spring lock in chartreuse with a 2/0 hook. I firmly believe that the shorter the shank, the better your odds of landing a magnum trout. I also believe that the spring lock style is far superior to the barbed style jig heads when it comes to keeping the soft plastic in place. I carry these jig heads in sixteenth, eighth and quarter ounce, with eighth being most commonly used. If I'm in a shallow, delicate situation I'll deploy the sixteenth. If wind or current is preventing me from keeping the jighead in contact with the bottom, I'll adjust to a quarter.

One issue to watch for with jigheads from some manufacturers is roughness inside of the eye where you tie your line. Some manufacturers seem to leave the ripples formed from making the bend, allowing the eye to fray your line or leader causing break offs.

As far as presentation goes, I'll allow the bait to sink to the bottom at the end of my cast before beginning my retrieve. My retrieve is basically hopping the lure along the bottom with short periods of slow dragging. Most of the distance my bait covers comes from hopping as opposed to dragging. If bites don't come quickly, I'll mix up the speed and vary the number of hops. Sometimes I'll allow the bait to sit motionless on the bottom for periods and other times I'll forgo any dragging or pauses and just hop it all

the way in. As with any other artificial lure, mixing things up until you get the desired strikes is necessary with soft plastics.

The bottom line to successful fishing is as follows, in order of importance:

1. **Locating fish.** No matter how good your lure selection process is, you can't catch a fish that isn't there.
2. **Lure selection.** Anticipating the mood of the fish and factoring in the conditions at the moment are key.
3. **Lure presentation.** Once you determine what they want, you have to figure out how they want it.
4. **Adapt to changing conditions.** So your spectacular dawn topwater bite has played out... Did the fish leave? If so, where did they go? Are they still nearby but lower in the water column and in a less-aggressive feeding mood? Many times you can tie on a soft plastic or other lure and resume catching.