

The Bug of the Mud and Other Tweaked Baits

Written by Dan McGarry • February 2011



Before Jerry Thompson (Jerry Thompson was synonymous with lunker winner; Jerry was a big fish specialist and when he was hot no amount of weight in a morning weigh-in was enough. Jerry was famous for big fish, big tournament weights, and his dips when he spoke at meetings) moved to North Carolina, he had a get rid of excess tackle at a sale at our monthly meeting.

Among the items I purchased was a lure that was magic and the reel I was to use it with. On a table with other Thompson-sized lures was a bone and orange crankbait; it was large enough to scare off any bass under two pounds. Its lip was wide and chrome and it just begged me to buy it along with its brother. At that time I was a regular cranking fool (taken from the Frank Zappa song) and my number one deep diver was a Rebel Maxi-R in bone and orange. It was the largest crankbait they made at the time and, as always, it was discontinued and I was looking for a replacement. The Maxi-R had accounted for tournament wins and a seven-pound Bass. The reel I purchased was a 4:1 ration XLT ambassador, I stress the gear ratio because, at times, the low speed is essential for all deep divers. Back to the Mud Bug... The first time I tied the bait on I new it would be magic. I used it a few times when nothing else worked and it did not fail me. One day I was on Cayuga Lake in a tournament being backseated or front ended (yes, it happens to everyone when they start out, we have a sign painted on our back and its green), and we were fishing the Seneca locks area after a morning of small weed bed fish looking for a "slobber hagen" (Swedish for "big bass"). My partner was throwing a large spinner bait and a jig (at that time I had no confidence in a jig, it was just something that took up space in my tackle box) as he was nosing the boat into another prime looking spot. I was growing tired of throwing my slider worm into 20' of water or over his shoulders so I took out the "Bug" and started throwing it into the deep water and cranking it back encountering many weeds. What I noticed was when thrown deep and returned shallow it would come through the weeds with relative ease, but more importantly, Jerry had sold me a defective bait; it was a leaker and when stopped it would hang wagging its tail and slowly rising in a most provocative wiggle (this is caused by water pressure exerting force on the large bill). On about the twenty-something cast and a couple of comments about me dredging up weeds by my partner, I stopped the bait to change the rod angle

and had a bass slam the bait with such force I almost swallowed my tabbaco! The bass weighed four pounds and started me thinking...maybe this bait was special.

Back to Long Island, the next time the "Bug" saw action was in Whaley Lake where it took its first of many lunker awards. After getting a limit I started fishing it again looking for a big fish in the final hour and after culling three fish out with it I could not resist a fallen log on a steep bank into 20' of water. I made a cast almost on shore and started pumping it down the trunk until it became hung which caused me to stop my retrieve and as the bait started to back up, a five pound bass hammered the bait. One-week later, in Hither Hills after a limit of small fish in the morning and a very depressing afternoon, I started throwing "Mr. Bug" (he earned it). After about fifteen minutes, again, another five pound bass! This caused Dennis Rogers to say, "Doesn't that bait catch anything under five pounds?" I could go on and on about my success with this bait but I will bore you no more. Sometime after Hither Hills, I was up at the New York State Team event on the Mohawk River. By now the "Bug" was becoming legendary; it was a sad day when my Bug wore its line attachment off and was retired to my classic collection of lures (my Hall of Fame box, which sits next to my Big Mistakes box -- you know the box that you keep your dance's eel in). But I still had its brother and I was determined to find more "Bugs".

After some looking I found some and purchased about a dozen in a few choice colors -- fire-tiger, blue and black, red and black, and white. The white ones became bone and orange in short order. I found their hooks to be dull and clunky so I changed them to #2 Gamagaktsu's (Japanese for favorable balance of trade) and I was ready. Here is another phenomenon that occurs after your search for a sacred bait of mythical proportions, it is called you catch nothing on it. After about a year of frustration, I started messing around with weighting crankbaits; it was the age of the suspending jerk bait. I started messing around with baits I could care less if I messed them up and the "Bug" was one of them. I put the old Thompson lure in the tank (my pool, that's why I have one lure testing) and noticed it would rocket to the surface, I drilled it out and added some steel shot until it would make a lazy wiggle to the surface and reseal the hole using devcon epoxy and clear coat. For some reason this supercharged my confidence in the bait and Eric Fieldstadt and I proceeded to go out on Wildwood Lake in a winter series tournament and weigh in a scary limit of Bass (I don't remember the weight but it was very good). The "Bug" became a main stay in my boat due to its effectiveness in the weeds, wood and rocks, it has become what I call on windy days "The Automatic Jig." It catches quality fish, and other than the Rat-I-Trap, it is the best weed crank bait ever made. Thanks to suspend strips, varying weight is easy, even if each bait must be tuned differently (due to the injection mold process). When adding weight to the bait place three strips to the tail treble hook on the shank and at least four on the bill

(this allows the bait to throw better and causes the bait to land bill down ready to retrieve), after that it takes a few more and some hand tuning to get them to run just right.

The equipment needed to fish the "Bug" is a 7' heavy action rod, a rod you would use for big spinnerbaits. I use a Fenwick Boron X which has an 80/20 taper, this is very different than my other crankbait rods which are Phoenix custom made Rat-L-Trap rods or Team Daiwa Rick Clunn cranking sticks. The heavy action and the fast taper is needed for the power to pull through the weeds and the sensitivity to feel the movement of the bait. This is very important when you stop the bait and wait three to ten seconds to let the bait slowly back up. For line I use Silver Thread in 12# test, this allows for maximum depth and strength. The "Bugs" I use are in three primary colors bone and orange, fire tiger, and red and black; stick with colors that give you confidence, but bone is still number one. Always use a bait with a metal shiny lip that gives off maximum flash, and change the hooks to #2 thin wire hooks. The lures I use are custom tweaked in my backyard pool and each one takes time to get right. The better baits rise slowly when they are stopped and you will feel them pulse on the pause. The "bug" is to power crankbaits what the Lucky craft Pointer 78 is to suspending jerkbaits -- it is a finesse crankbait. The reel I use is a 4:1 ratio XLT; just like the rod it is not made anymore. The gear ratio allows for a slower more controlled retrieve and allows for better feel and greater depth.

The "Mud Bug" is best used in two situations. Put your boat in 3' to 5' of water and cast out into 20' or deeper (the most effective range is weeds in 15' to 10' of water). I try to cast at a 45-degree angle in order to maximize my lure coverage and to not drive my partner crazy. As you move along, pay attention to when and where strikes occur, very rarely do you only catch one in an area. Every time you cast pay attention to anything that

will give you a point of reference to return the bait to the same area. Crank the bait about six to seven good hard turns down, then slow up when you feel the bait strike weeds, rock, brush, or bottom. Stop and count to three; you will feel the bait moving away and up. A bass will just blast or it will feel like a worm hit Mr. Bass and he will just swim off with it in his mouth. This is hard to believe, but bass actually eat items that are pointy and hard; they are not big on oatmeal, and next time you are out fishing put a live Bluegill or Crayfish in your mouth and tell me what the difference is.

One thing that always happens is the best bass hit when the bait starts its arc up from the bottom or the end of the retrieve and they always swim to the boat with a little inside -- outside roll (which appears to be the main reason they have become big fish). Rod position is very important to avoid fatigue, keep the rod low and only put slight pressure on the rod by changing the angle and using the reel to winch the bait along.

The second way I like to use the "Bug" is on exceptionally windy days when the jig bite is hard to feel. I will fish upwind making log low casts along the bank on rocky flats in 3' to 6' of water. I just have the motor on high and I buzz the bait along allowing it to bounce and deflect off of every object. The final Mud Bug method I use is the ricochet method. I take the bait and purposely try to crash it through shallow water and deepwater thick cover. Mr. Bass will turn down worms and jigs to blast an alien monster that slams into his tree.

I hope this helps some of you still reluctant closet crankers out there; all crankbaits catch fish and none of them run as deep as their company advertises.

See you on the water ...Dan McGarry