In the Land of GIANTS

Bass on the Fly in Lake Huron's Georgian Bay

Text and Photos by Douglas Paton

At mid-morning, we'd been fishing for hours. It wasn't the greatest day that we'd had. It was overcast, probably the coldest day we'd experienced so far. The fishing had been, as usual, on fire, but not for the fish we were hoping for. We'd been drawn to the French River area of Georgian Bay by the promise of walleye fishing and, while we'd caught a couple so far, it wasn't what we'd hoped for — pretty normal for these trips.

We drifted through the small rocky islands scattered all over the French River delta and heard the unmistakable sound of a bass hitting topwater. If you've never experienced topwater bass before, this isn't a gentle process. The fish don't cautiously approach the surface, and they sure don't sip whatever's sitting on top of the water the way a trout does. With bass, it's more like the sound of a toilet flushing, a *fwoosh* that sucks in anything within a good six inches of the fish's mouth.

Fwoosh

Fwoosh

The sound echoed around the bay again and again. I'd never really heard anything like it. So many bass were surfacing at once all around me, enough to get my heart pounding. After a few minutes, I couldn't take it anymore. "Let's head in," I said. "I need to change over my setup."

What had started out as a walleye trip had just shifted into a full-blown bass trip, and they were on topwater.

The Surprise Bass Trip

This wasn't the first time a trip had changed directions. I had been through this before with Mark, my long-time fishing buddy, former bandmate, and one-time co-worker. There was the walleye trip that turned into a crappie trip. There was also the walleye trip that turned into a trout trip. And the walleye trip that turned into a no-fish trip. This was the walleye trip that had turned into some of the best fishing I've ever experienced.

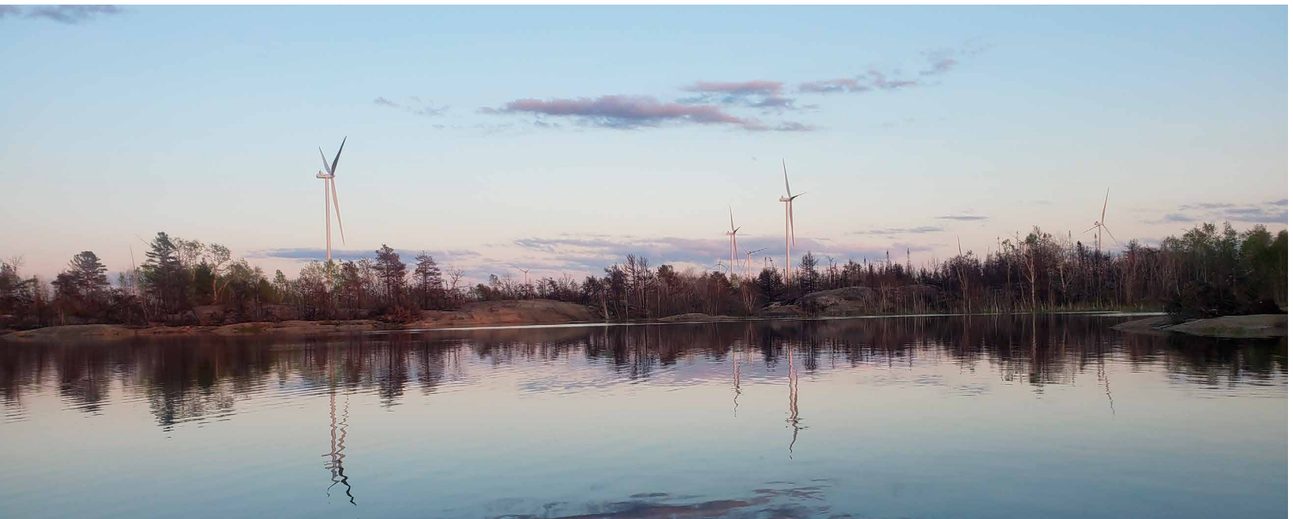
It was luck more than anything else that brought us to Georgian Bay, although it wasn't surprising we'd end up so close to the French River, a world-famous walleye fishery. For me, Georgian Bay was like returning home. I live on the west coast of Canada these days, but these were my home waters. I'd spent countless hours exploring Georgian Bay as a kid, eventually moving up to Manitoulin Island. Just hearing where Mark had booked fired up my imagination.

These weren't the small, closed waters we'd been fishing up to this point. This was serious water, and I knew the area well enough to be cautious. On the first day the fog was so thick we could barely see the giant windmills hovering faintly above us as we motored our way to our home for the week. It was like watching huge robots sit silently just out of sight, waiting for who knows what to happen.

The scenery is classic Canadian Shield. Huge swaths of rock line both sides of the Key River; houses and cottages cover the pre-Cambrian rock on one side, windmills on the other. The Shield is the defining feature, regardless. It tells the history of this area better than anything, from the complex patterns left by the glacial retreat of the last ice age to long-forgotten boat rings. If you dove into the deep, tannic water, you might discover more history, like the time we found and raised an old boat from the depths as kids — not far from where Mark and I were fishing.

The next day, we started exploring the region in earnest. We ventured out beyond the ancient pilings that harkened back to the days when Key Harbour was a shipping port, visiting any spot where our borrowed chart listed a "W" for walleye. The first time we tied into a bass, we were backing slowly out of a bay, getting ready for a second drift in. I had left my line in the water, something that would become a recurring theme for the week, and just as I was thinking, "This is exactly the kind of scenario that leads to a bass strike," BOOM! There it was. A decent smallie had hammered my fly, a Scotty's McFly — often the only fly I fish in situations like this — and it was fish on.

It was our first glimpse of what the rest of the week was going to be like and, at a respectable two-ish pounds, that was probably the smallest fish we caught all week. What we didn't realize at the time was that the bass in Georgian Bay are different.



A Once in a Lifetime Fish (Hopefully not!)

Georgian Bay bass are very much the product of their environment. Unlike their smaller water counterparts, these fish have room to grow. Competition is fierce, with everything from the large, deep-water pike to the giant snapping turtles that hang out in the shallow marshy areas all going for the same thing.

The good news is that there is no shortage of food in the area. Once everything warms up, the water is filled with huge schools of minnows. If you were to dive in, it'd be like swimming through a coral reef, at least in terms of fish numbers. Add in the fact that leeches over six inches long also call the area home, and you have fish that end up both big and aggressive.

The first time we got a sense of what we were in for came a few hours after we caught the first fish. It was clear almost immediately that this wasn't your typical smallie. It fought harder and with an intensity I wasn't used to. It turned out to be a solid four-ish pounder that would become the "cookie-cutter" bass for the week.

They lurked around every corner, it seemed, and every few casts in each spot would bring yet another four-ish pounder to the boat. The defining moment was pulling into a supposed walleye spot, a small, nondescript waterfall off the beaten path, only to pull in four fish in four casts, three of which were over four pounds. Another group staying one cabin over told us later that they had pulled 23 fish out of the same spot. These fish weren't just huge — they were quite literally everywhere.

Going Topwater

The decision to go topwater meant we had to be ready not only for the bass that haunted these waters, but the pike that lurked around, too. I rigged accordingly with a thick, 20lb tippet and a wire leader going to my fly, a deer hair mouse.

If you've never experienced topwater bass fishing before, it's a sight to behold. I'll never forget my first topwater hit. It was a bass, a beautiful fish that had been hiding under a buoy in a small lake in New Brunswick. That fish was nothing compared to what we'd seen so far on this trip, but even that one had been enough to drag me around the lake for a while.

The trick, it seemed, was to start as close to shore as possible. All that week, we'd watched as bass nearly beached themselves chasing some unknown food source. Although they were hiding out in all the usual places, they clearly had a soft spot for the shallows.

More importantly, bass look to the surface when it's cloudy and during low light situations, like dusk. I remember as a kid my dad's boating friend Irwin waiting until sunset to throw jitterbugs and hula poppers when we boated not far from Key Harbour, but I never really understood why. "Why wouldn't they just fish during the day?" I wondered.

Now I get it. Boy, do I get it.



The Sunset Bite

At the end of the day, after we'd decided to switch over to topwater to chase bass, we found ourselves in a shallower bay. We'd fished this one earlier in the week and wanted to try it again using topwater.

We started close to shore, me throwing my deer hair mouse, Mark, a die-hard gear chucker, tossing a frog.

A few casts later, a giant arched back surfaced as my dry line hit the water. A few casts after that, a small pike took the mouse in the same spot.

We fished around, moving and drifting, not having much luck. After a bit, it was time to move; we'd obviously drifted out of the sweet spot and needed to change positions. I left my mouse in the water as we motored back out into the bay. We weren't going slow — we moved at a modest pace with the mouse dragging behind us.

There's no way to describe what happened next without sounding like a liar, but that's to be expected from a fish story. As we drove off, the water behind us suddenly exploded as the biggest bass I've ever seen inhaled my mouse. Even in the growing darkness, this bass was unmistakably large. Far bigger than anything else we'd seen together, not counting sturgeon. If I had to guess, I'd say this fish was over 7lbs.

It flew three feet into the air, taking my fly with it, before plunging back into the depths. What followed was easily the most exciting 30 seconds of my life — before the fish spit my mouse back to the surface.

I collapsed back into my seat on the boat, heart-pounding, hands shaking. "That's why my dad's friend always fished this area at sunset," I thought to myself.

Douglas Paton is a writer and fisherman living British Columbia's Okanagan Valley. Most of his time is spent writing, and he spends his free hours harassing trout (and other fish) around Canada.

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