

Reflections On A Year In Cornwall - Robin Bradley

Robin Bradley lives in south west Cornwall and fishes from the shore, using different methods such as float fishing, legering and spinning. His baits include prawns, crabs and lures. He and a team of other members in the area have been active and successful taggers over the last two seasons. Here he reflects on his fishing during 2001.

It always brings a smile to my face when, during those dark evenings after Christmas, I recall, to myself, some of the bass related events of the previous year, and begin to anticipate the start of a new season.

There was the January telephone call from John Leballeur, announcing that one of the bass we had tagged in August on one of the Bude beaches, had just been recaptured from the same mark. Thus showing, firstly how territorial bass can be, secondly, that bass can be caught in winter and finally, that particular fish had yet to migrate.

Then came March and the AGM. It was, as usual, very enjoyable with many interesting presentations and much opportunity for thought provoking discussion. I want to offer a big Thank You to Wayne James especially, for all the hard work he put into compiling the CD Rom of past BASS magazines.

Early April brought another call from John, this time to report that another of our tagged fish had been landed at Newlyn. The fish had been tagged in October near Portscatho on the other side of the Lizard Peninsula. Unfortunately it was not known where the fish was actually caught.

Late April brought my first trip of the year to my crab traps. As usual some had washed away over the winter. Most needed clearing out as they were heavily silted, but despite this there were plenty of jacks around, as is usual for this time of year. The hens usually show mid -summer before the second flush of jacks in the autumn.

The north coast of Cornwall was closed due to the foot and mouth epidemic, but there was limited access to the south coast. As a result I slightly delayed my first trip of the year because the south coast is not usually very productive until May. The footpath to the beach I had chosen was open but not the coast path either side of it. Consequently, I was unable get to my usual mark. In the hope that it would deliver me a new hotspot, I decided to try somewhere slightly different, but to no avail!

As the north coast footpath had been partially reopened in time for the May bank holiday, Steve Lambert and I fished near Trevose Head. This session produced our first two tagged fish of the year - one of these fish was to be recaptured in December at Sennen Cove, presumably as it was migrating south to shoal prior to spawning.

Late May, and the sea temperature was 12°C which is about normal for this time of year in Cornwall. Although there are certainly some bass around, it is not until there is that definite jump in sea temperature toward the end of July that the fish show in greater numbers.

Mid June saw a good run of juveniles in the estuary. Armed with light gear and floats, Bob Lean and I went down to the river to try our luck. But first we needed bait. Eventually, using our push nets, we managed to get enough prawns, although they were

a bit on the small side. Later in the summer decent sized prawns are abundant.

Float fishing with live prawn is one of my favourite ways of catching bass. Picking live bait at your feet and then presenting it on a size 1 short shank fine wire hook tied straight onto 15lb main line under a sliding 15g self weighted float, must be one of the simplest ways of fishing. When a bass takes, the float shoots under and the light rod bucks away as the fish darts here and there. There are no heavy weights to drag around. Estuary fishing generally yields a predominance of smaller fish, but I was hoping for some over the 40cm tagging size limit. During 2000, I was catching fish up to 38 cm so was unable to tag any. However, in 2001, bass that I assume to be the same year class have grown to around 42 cm and so we tagged nine in one weekend. I presume this will be their last year in the nursery and then they will migrate to join the adolescents shoaling offshore over the winter.

I do enjoy getting the maps out and doing a bit of exploring, but there are times when you have just got to take advantage of the conditions that many hours of fishing a favourite venue teach you are right. One such evening occurred at the end of June with a flooding neap tide and a brisk south-westerly. I began catching bass around dusk, using a grey and black Jointed Thunderstick. I find this shallow running plug ideal for fishing the inter-tidal areas. Its vigorous eel-like action seems to turn on the predatory instincts of bass in choppy to rough conditions. I landed three fish before the light finally went and although I have caught fish on plugs such as the Rebel J 30 here after dark, I actually wanted to leger the rough ground with shore crab. I changed to bottom fishing gear. This mark is fairly reliable on crab in these conditions and it wasn't long before I was getting bites. After landing another two fish I couldn't resist having a quick look at one particular gully that, for some time, I had fancied have a go at. I was dead chuffed when after five minutes I landed a plump 3lb bass. This was a fairly typical session for this mark. There is good sport but it doesn't seem to be a mark where big fish turn up. Still I was pleased that I had tagged the three fish. All were caught on shore crab.

The sea temperature reached 17° C by mid July and the fish seemed to be everywhere along the south coast. The following day I was due to go away for a family holiday, bad planning you might say! So, despite conditions being calm and sunny, I decided to squeeze in a quick afternoon trip to plug fish another of my favourite spots. I can still picture, in my mind, the sight of all those fish just hanging in the clear water as I approached one particular gully. These, I thought might be just the right conditions for that new plug Jon Hanat had been telling me about. It is called the YoZuri Arms Pencil. I remember, when I first saw Jon jerking it across the surface, thinking that it had all the fish appeal of a dead stick. Still he swore by it and it wasn't long before I discovered why. After the first few turns of the reel, fish were slashing violently across the surface at it. This was exciting stuff! I eventually landed five bass, one of which was particularly interesting, in that it took after the plug had been stationary in the water for a couple of minutes. I guess just the movement caused by the very slight swell must have been enough to attract the fish.

Just as quickly as the fish came they seemed to go again. I am not sure why. It may be that the plankton bloom covering most of the south coast and which seems to have become a regular feature at this time of year puts the fish off. It is also possible that they were chasing whitebait further out from shore. Bass caught by boat anglers at this time were stuffed with the things.

By the middle of August things had picked up again. I went down to another of my favourite marks hoping to plug for an hour or so and then to follow this with a couple of hours of bottom fishing with crab. However, by dusk I had only had one take on plugs. Although a little disheartened, I have learned that a lack of fish on plugs does not necessarily mean there are none about. The rest of the session proved to be a hectic two hours during which I landed six fish up to 4lb on shore crab. The fish were from a range of year classes. Had I not been tagging I would probably have landed twice this number but I was well pleased to add another five bass to my tagging total.

A week later, during one of the biggest tides of the year, I decided to plug a rough ground mark near to the mouth of an estuary. The sea seemed to be alive with bass slashing into baitfish. Bass were sometimes jumping clean out of the water literally within yards of the waters edge. So close in fact, that I think my presence was deterring the bass from taking the little YoZuri Arms Pencil I was using. Unable to conceal myself, in desperation I tried casting along the shore so that the plug landed about 30 yards to my left about a yard out. A couple of turns of the reel handle and bang! a 2lb bass slammed into the plug. Once I had discovered this ploy, that was it! Seven bass was my final tally.

After such a good August that saw my team reporting forty tagged fish, our highest ever monthly return, September was disappointingly quiet.

Things started to look up again in October. The high spot of the month was the discovery of a new mark. Although I had fished the area for several years, a tip from Jon Hanat directed me a bit further along the shore. It was a backing tide and I fished with plugs. Initially, I slightly misjudged the tide and had to wait for it to strip back enough for me to gain access to a long stretch of rocky shoreline. At first there was no response to my plugs, but undaunted I kept going until at last a 2lb bass took the Yozuri Arms Pencil. Perhaps many anglers would then have stayed put and just kept trying the same area, but, at this stage, I was more concerned to discover the potential of the mark than to land a bag of fish. I thought to myself 'OK, so lets push it and see if they are anywhere else along here'. As the light faded I cast the plug across this narrow gully and immediately saw a fish chase the plug. Several casts later another fish shot out to grab the plug about a yard away from the rock on which I was stood.

October also produced an amusing episode whilst out with Bob Lean fishing a rocky beach. Things had been quiet, so he started looking under some stones only to find a juicy edible peeler. Although I mainly use shore crab since these are easier to come by, edible crab is for me the caviar of baits. I think of it as being like offering fillet steak rather than minced beef. 'You have it' said Bob 'as a reward for all those shore crab you've given me' What bass could resist this I thought, as I loaded the 6/0 Viking with the sweet purple & cream meat. Sure enough within a couple of minutes a nice 4lb bass was flapping on the rocks. I won't repeat Bob's comments but he was to get his turn a little later when he landed a bass of about 3lbs using one of my shore crabs.

As November slipped away, I started thinking about calling it a day. But this time of year is great for those of us who enjoy legering for bass. With the clear water that is usual in Cornwall, I always feel more confident at night when bottom fishing in calmish conditions. Though some anglers say that, when fishing rough ground, the time of day or night doesn't matter, especially at this time of year when the fish should be feeding avidly. However, all I've ever caught during the day are scabby wrasse! Since it gets

dark around 4.30pm in November, I can fit in a fishing session and still be home for 8.00pm. This does wonders for marital relations! I made my way down to a little cove that fishes well in an easterly (so much for old wives tales). I went more in hope than in certainty because I had never before fished this mark so late in the year. I really I wanted to see if I could get a few more fish tagged. After an hour fishing the gully where the bass usually show I had no action to show for it. I decided to make a shorter cast onto a bit of cleaner ground among the reefy bits. It was then a bite a cast for the next hour. Three of the bass were taggable. It was magic!

My last fish of the year came on 9th December. It was tagged and it brought the total return for my group to a hundred and ten for the year, and a hundred and seventy over the two years of the project.

Not a bad year then. I was disappointed not to get anything over 4lbs but nevertheless had some very enjoyable trips. For the last two years I have concentrated on places that were likely to produce as many fish over the tagging size as possible rather than marks where the odd few lunkers might show up. Being involved in the tagging programme has given me great pleasure. Where previously I had only measured success in terms of bigger fish being caught, I always felt I had achieved something when I was able to tag even small bass. I even enjoy the blank trips as long as there are not too many!

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