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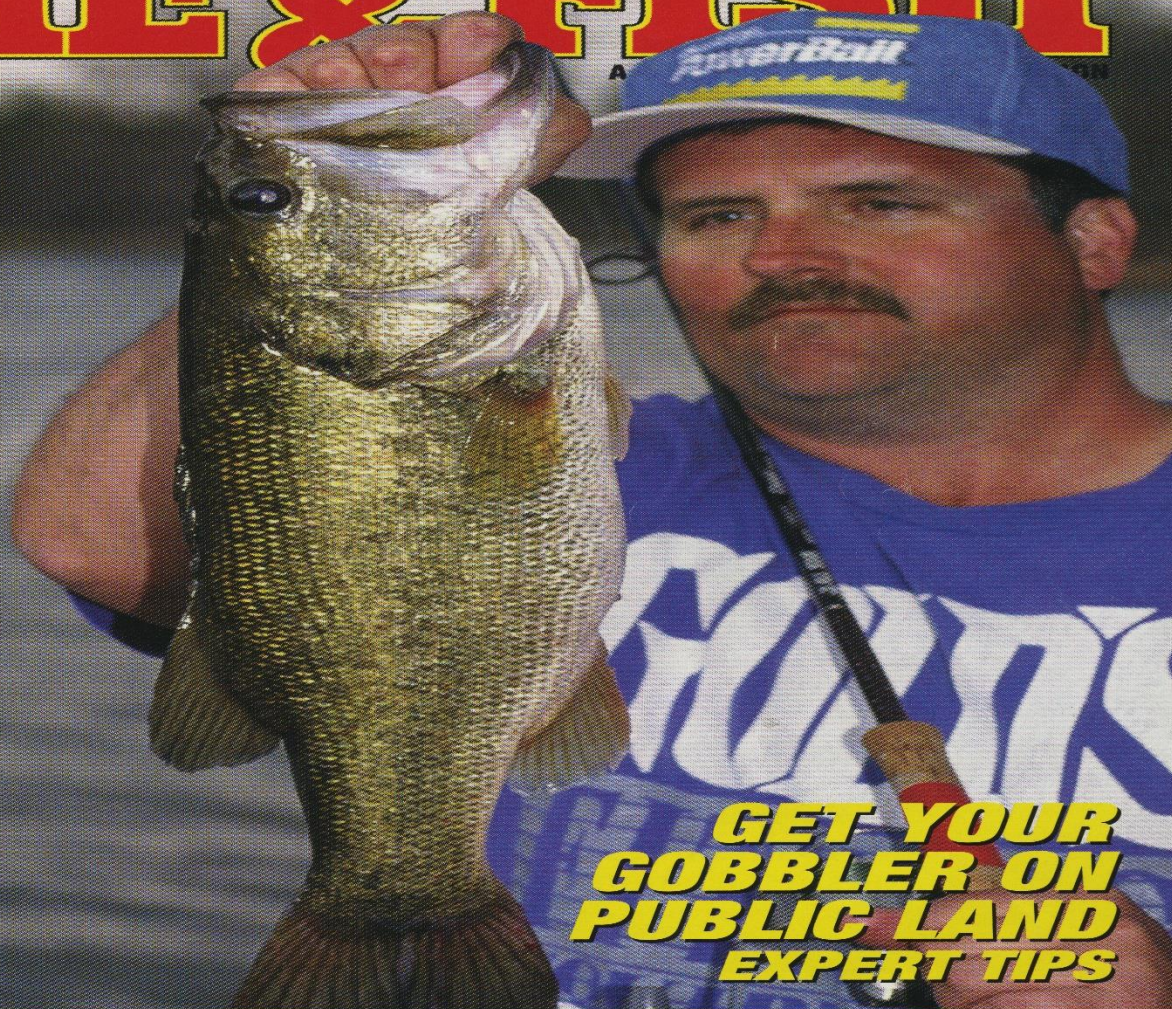
## **EASTERN SIERRA TROUT GUIDE** *2003 OUTLOOK*

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# Casitas

## Bassin'

*Lake Casitas, one of the glamour waters among trophy bass anglers, recorded a whopping 200 sport-caught largemouths of 10 pounds or more last year, including a 19.8-pounder that surprised the entire South State.*

*by Chris Shaffer*

Randy King is a walking almanac. With 35 years of Lake Casitas fishing records, catches, fish tendencies, water levels and other data crammed into his brain, King has developed a theory that has allowed him to correctly rattled off prediction after prediction all the way through 2001. Recently, however, he has been stumped.

Having managed boat rentals at Lake Casitas since 1967, the marina manager has seen the best of times and the worst of times, but his accomplishments as prognosticator of all things bass fishing here have tripped up this human almanac. Now even he can't predict what will happen with Casitas' world-class bass fishery this year, and that could be good news for southern California bass anglers.

You see, King thought it was a myth that there was any chance of a world-record bass being caught at Casitas.

*Guide Marc Mitrany shows off a 7-pound bucketmouth from Casitas. He fishes only with shad during May and June. Photo by Chris Shaffer.*

According to his theory, the odds of Casitas producing that record fish were solid a few years ago, but they've worsened with each passing year.

The first sizeable group of big bass at Casitas came in the early 1980s, says King. They were the original Florida-strain largemouths transplanted from Upper Otay Reservoir as 3- to 4-year-old broodstock to create a bigger, faster-growing bass at Casitas. The scheme worked. However, those pure Florida-strain bass went on to breed with northern-strain largemouths that already inhabited the lake, thus producing a slightly smaller fish and decreasing the chance of a bass growing to world-record size in the 2,500-acre lake in the rolling hills north of Ojai.

Then Randy Crabtree caught a 19.8-pound largemouth in April 2002, shooting King's theory to pieces. The fish was the 12th largest bass ever caught by a sport angler.

"I thought I had it figured out, but last year screwed up my whole theory. Crabtree's fish messed up every-



thing," King said. "I haven't come up with a new theory. I believed the old theory for a long time, but Crabtree's fish was a hybrid. They don't grow as big as the Floridas do. Theoretically, that fish shouldn't have been that big. The world record may be in this lake."

It sure may. Here's proof.

It's been a year since Crabtree released the 19.8-pound fish. With more than 75,000 rainbow trout planted into the lake annually, not to mention an abundance of shad, crawdads and panfish, the bass grow large fast at Casitas.

#### EATING TROUT

"A fish physiologist once told me that for every pound of trout a bass eats it gains one-fourth to one-third of a pound of body weight," says Dwayne Maxwell, a senior biologist for the California Department of Fish and Game.

Take note: Casitas bass eat a lot of trout.

If history repeats itself, Crabtree's big fish could be well over the 21-pound mark by now, but Crabtree isn't telling where he caught the fish,

or where he released her in the lake.

"Let's face it: We are putting a lot of trout in Casitas. That's why the bass in California are so big. They are eating trout," Maxwell said. "This state stocks a lot of trout for bass to eat. As for the hybrids, there isn't a pure Florida-strain anywhere anymore. The hybrids probably aren't going to be as big, but I really don't know for sure. If I had a pure Florida and a hybrid in my hands, I probably wouldn't be able to tell them apart. There are some big hybrids in Casitas."

Lake Casitas is touted as one of the country's premier bass waters. Anglers nationwide plan trips here for a shot at George Perry's 22-pound, 4-ounce world record he set with a Georgia fish more than 70 years ago. Will that record be broken at Ventura County's Casitas? King won't touch that prediction, but the debate goes on and on.

"Anyone's guess is a good as mine," Maxwell said. "I have no idea if the next world record will be caught there. The world record could

be sitting on the bottom of any of these area lakes. The potential for the world-record bass to be caught at Casitas is good, but it's also good at Castaic."

Because of year-round growing conditions and plentiful food sources for bass, many anglers and biologists agree that a handful of southern California waters have a shot at producing that highly sought fish. With 32 miles of shoreline and depths to 250 feet, Lake Casitas is atop a good many anglers' lists as they plot their strategy to eclipse Perry's record.

#### HEFTY FISH

In 2002 Casitas kicked out a staggering 200 bass over 10 pounds. These fish were all weighed and photographed at Lake Casitas Marina, and those were just the verified catches. Many more were caught by anglers trying to keep their catches a secret and at night-fishing tournaments when Lake Casitas marina was closed and unable to verify fish. Those fish were not included in the 200.

"Casitas is one of the top five bass lakes in the world," said Marc Mitrany, operator of Ojai Angler Fishing Guide Service — 1-800-572-6230 — who fishes Casitas exclusively. "It's in position to produce the next world-record bass. This lake is loaded with giant bass. We caught 15 fish over 10 pounds in 2002. We hooked into so many big fish this year, many over 10 pounds, but it's hard to bring a double-digit bass in on 6-pound-test. If I had a dollar for every big fish my clients lost this year, I'd be (rich)."

While it may sound like every angler catches lunkers at Casitas, the reservoir isn't just a trophy fishery. Bass in the 2- to 3-pound and 5- to 7-pound classes are more common than those of 10 pounds or more. While the impression is that every angler goes home with a Polaroid of a huge bass, that isn't the norm.

"Lake Casitas is very unpredictable. You never know what you are going to catch out there," Mitrany said. "It's a great bass fishing lake, but you need to spend a lot of time on the water to catch the bigger fish. A lot of people can't do that, because

### WORKING WITH SHAD

**S**had fishing comes with some challenges: Shad aren't easy to catch, they take time to locate, you need a shad net to catch them, and then you need to know how to fish them.

While shad nets can be expensive and difficult to find in southern California, tackle shops that don't stock them can order one for you. They are available in Cabela's and Bass Pro Shops catalogs. You will also need a boat with an electric trolling motor, as gas motors tend to spook shad.

Shad are most successfully netted when they are on the surface. Find the baitfish quickly by looking for seagulls, cranes and other birds actively feeding on schooling baitfish. Also look for other anglers dipping shad nets.

Shad average 3 to 5 inches in length and swim in bait balls of thousands of fish, but they can be elusive. As a prey species, shad are extremely wary. You have use stealth to catch them. "They aren't easy to catch. We have guys that will spend more time catching bait than fishing," said Randy King, who has run boat rentals at Lake Casitas since 1967.

Casitas' clear water conditions and the fishing pressure the lake receives dictate that anglers use nothing heavier than 6-pound-test.

Is the headache of netting shad worth it? "This year I had more than 30 days where we caught more than 50 fish," said Marc Mitrany, operator of Ojai Angler Fishing Guide Service (800-572-6230). "Anytime you have a chance to be on the water, you should."

Rigging the shad is no science. Shad should be hooked through the nostril or the tail with an extremely sharp small hook and then free-lined without extra weight. Keep a little swagger in the line, which allows the shad to swim more freely, thus making your bait lively and attractive to hungry bass. — *Chris Shaffer*

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## CASITAS BASSIN' ... Continued

they have to work."

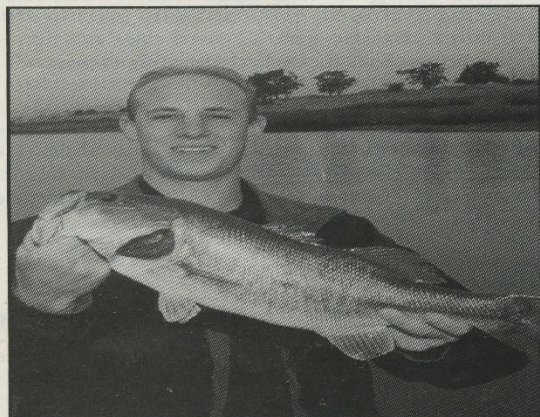
### SECRET BAIT REVEALED

While catch rates are good year 'round, the stretch from late winter through early spring is when the highest numbers of fish are landed here. In fact, springtime bass fishing can be phenomenal at Casitas. The secret is using shad.

Shad were seldom used as bait from the 1970s through the mid-'90s, but the secret is out. If you are interested in catching 50 fish a day but not necessarily the lake's biggest bass, shad fishing is the way to go.

Shad fishing can be a blast. The hard part is netting the shad in the lake. Shad are only available to the angler in the spring when they move into shallow areas to spawn. While exact dates fluctuate within a three-month period, there are some clues you can look for.

Shad begin to creep from the lake's depths when the surface temperature rises to 66 degrees. At Casitas this usually occurs in early May. Once the water reaches 68 degrees, shad begin spawning in earnest in shallow water, most notably coves and still-water areas. By the time the surface temperature reaches 70 degrees, usually by the last week of June, shad relocate in deeper water and anglers must wait for the following spring to repeat the



Author Chris Shaffer used a 4-inch live shad to draw a strike from this 6-pound Casitas largemouth. Photo courtesy of Chris Shaffer.

drama of shadmania.

The good thing about shad is that bass aggressively pursue them. The farther away from the boat you cast, the better, but at times schooling-sized bass have been known to nab a shad swimming under boats.

Bigger shad catch bigger fish, so use the biggest one in your bait tank. Another tip: The more lively the shad, the better chance it's going to get eaten. Replace sluggish shad with something that a bit more lively and energetic.

### CASITAS HOTSPOTS

Whether you work them with shad, other live bait or artificials, fishing certain areas at Casitas is imperative for success. The north end of the lake harbors the most fish. Station Canyon, Crawdad Point, the Waddle arm and Orchard Point are always consistent producers of big fish and quality numbers. However, don't overlook the island and dam area.

Shad anglers tend to land the most fish, especially those in the 3- to 5-pound class, with several running 7 to 9 pounds. Anything larger isn't a daily occurrence, but nearly so anytime before June. The problem is it's difficult to land big bass on the light lines necessary for shad fishing in Casitas' clear water.

"When things are rockin' and rollin' and the shad are up, you can catch 50 fish a day," King said. "We see some people that only fish Casitas when the shad are up. Back when I first started here no one was using shad, but now it's a big thing. If the shad die, keep them. The dead shad work great for the trout."

"It doesn't matter what time you fish," Mitrany said. "Shad fishing works all day. We catch fish in the morning, around lunch, in the afternoon and in the evening. The fishing is great."

### OTHER BAITS

Anglers who don't use shad typically tie on live crawdads. Crawdads have also been a promising and consistent producer of bass at Casitas. While shad steal the show in May and June, crawdads work year 'round — and they tend to produce bigger strings of fish than shad do.

"In May crawdads are dynamite," says Len Taylor of Taylor Tackle in

## THE CASITAS BIG-FISH STORY

The California Department of Fish and Game introduced Florida-strain largemouth bass to Lake Casitas and other southland lakes in the late 1970s. The bass-fishing world changed forever when Ray Easley, a fireman from Arcadia, landed a state-record 21.3-pound largemouth on a crawdad at Casitas in 1980.

Since then Casitas Marina manager Randy King has documented more than 1,500 bass larger than 10 pounds. He weighed 200 of those in 2002 alone.

While no pure Florida-strain bass remain in the lake today,unker hybrid largemouths have exceeded growth expectations. Here are the Top 5 Casitas bass verified by King since Easley's record.

- 19.8 pounds, Randy Crabtree April 2002.
- 19 pounds, Joe Burkett, 1985.
- 19 pounds, Porter Hall, early '90s.
- 18.8 pounds, Jay Carter, 1993.
- 17.6 pounds, Bob Fern, 1993. — Chris Shaffer

Canoga Park. "The crawdads work well because the bass have completed their spawn, and they are trying to build up their body weight and bulk up again. The bass go on a prowl and eat crawdads especially."

Big trout imitation lures work best in the winter when trout plants occur, and holdover hatchery fish that lives until spring keep the bite going. But the imitation trout aren't as effective as either crawdads or shad, and they are a whole lot more difficult to fish. It's recommended that anglers use trout imitation lures with a minimum of 9 inches, which matches the size of most hatchery fish when they are planted in the lake.

Plastics can also be productive. Stick to dark 6- to 9-inch worms; the green weenie is the lightest you'd want to use. White and chartreuse spinnerbaits can also be productive.

"I think if the world record is caught out of here it will be caught on a crawdad or on one of the big soft baits," King ventured. "Crawdads have been a consistent producer over the years." □