

# Call of the Wild

## GETTING BACK TO THE NATURAL

**R**ain, hail, snow, HDTV, there are many things that keep us from getting back into the beautiful outdoors where we belong. If you've been hibernating for the last couple months or simply never taken time to explore the Oregon around you, now is the time. It's just about warm enough.

Maybe you should try something new and addictive, like getting hooked on bass fishing. Perhaps some of your outdoors skills have gotten rusty, and you need to get back on the horse — literally. It may be time to strip down and get natural with it at your local hot springs, or fire up your neglected BBQ grill in great Northwest tradition.

This is Oregon: We live here because it is beautiful and because we are surrounded by big trees, big rivers, lakes and mountains. From nature we have come, and to it we should return. In this *EW* Outdoors Issue, we urge you to take it outside and face the feral — nature calls. — *Dante Zuñiga-West*



## GET HOOKED

### *Backwoods bass fishing in Oregon*

by Dante Zuñiga-West

**M**y mom taught me how to fish. I was three years old, standing outside the bathtub with a tackle box and the tiny rod she bought me. I learned how to make a rubber worm come alive, how to tie knots and float bobbers. We lived in the city in Southern California, and until I grew old enough for my grandfather to take me north on overnight fishing trips, that bathtub was it. There wasn't much of an outdoors to enjoy in Los Angeles. It was a while before I came face to face with my first big fish. Kids who grow up in Oregon have it different. This here is bass country.

The North American largemouth bass is America's most popular freshwater fish. Bass fishing has become a multibillion-dollar industry in the United States. Professional bass anglers can make \$600,000 a year or more. Like other pseudo-recreational activities Mom fostered during those formative years, pursuits that walk a fine line between sport and something else — paintball, archery, long range marksmanship, etc. — generous sponsors are a must for the pro.

Bass boats, bass rods, bass reels, bass lures — it can get very complicated and expensive to be a bass master and, honestly, I never wanted to be one. I just wanted to go out into nature and catch big fish. I don't have a drift boat, either, and although I am enough of a yahoo to try my hand at navigating (or sinking) one on the McKenzie in pursuit of salmon, there is something starkly simplistic about pond fishing for big ol' bucket-mouths: Hiking into the bush, slinging your gear over your shoulder and making sure to keep your rod away from tree branches as you search for the right spot.

Bass are the malign thugs of the watery underworld, aggressive nonnative predators who will eat anything they can swallow — ducklings, frogs, snakes, lizards, even other bass. Through experience and with age, these fish grow increasingly adapted to their environment. This is

what makes going after them such an addictive thrill. It's like picking on really smart bullies, and the bigger they are the harder they fight.

In Oregon, largemouth are found primarily in lakes and ponds with temperatures of 68 to 78 degrees. They prefer water that is no deeper than 20 feet, with high dissolved oxygen levels and sunken vegetation, making it extra hard for you to pull your lure through. If bass see you, it's game over. You have to be sneaky, and sometimes you have to improvise. I caught several smallmouth bass on the Umpqua River, home to some of the best smallmouth fishing in the world, by cutting open a bass my friend caught and using the undigested crayfish in its belly as bait.

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Largemouth are meaner and can eat bigger creatures. A drunk, hairy bass fisherman from Eastern Oregon recently told me that you can have a great deal of luck by hooking a live bullfrog through the mouth and tossing it out as bait. I haven't tried that yet, and I'd never gone after largemouth in Oregon, until recently.

Let's say you have a passion for outdoor adventure, instilled by a fiercely involved parental figure at a young age. Let's imagine that this passion led you to seek out journeys and experiences the likes of which you used to read about while pining over photographs in hundreds of *Field & Stream* magazines you stockpiled as a kid. Maybe

you moved to the Pacific Northwest in continuation of this aforementioned passion. Maybe this passion became an obsession. Your stubborn quest to achieve wild-hearted outdoors undertakings could lead you to largemouth bass fishing. Oregon has uninhabited backcountry full of bass. Your family endearingly refers to you as the "Backwoods Blaxican," for reasons that involve your choice of lifestyle as well as your mixed cultural heritage. Into the backwoods you would go, rod and reel in tow. Most likely you would not do so alone.

Being humble and eager to learn, you would enlist a small squad of veteran backwoods fishermen to help with your efforts. You would boldly go where not many have fished before, carefully circumnavigating barbed wire fences and making sure your four-wheel drive vehicles weren't too easily found. You would bring only the bare essentials of bass fishing, a few spinners, crank bait, some rubber worms, ice, extra line, beer, night crawlers — things that make the upholstery of your Jeep

smell terrible. You would bushwhack in search of a pond monster. You would find her in her spawning bed, very pissed off at having been disturbed. The fight would be preceded by a huge tail swirl visible from the surface. It would end with you wading knee deep into the water and grabbing this monster bass by the mouth. Lifting it, you would smile and remember your mother. She would be proud. At long last, boy meets (largemouth) bass, backwoods meets Blaxican; those in other parts of the nation aren't so lucky. This bass country is ours, Oregon. Go play outside.

*Special thanks to fishermen Reuben Pachito, Nick Ragonesi and Mike Fulmer*