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CHAPTER ONE

What To Expect

What's going on?

This isn't a book about how to catch bass. It's a book about how I catch bass. There's a difference.

First of all I only fish a very small patch in west Cornwall. Petrol's not cheap, I don't like driving, and I never venture more than about fifteen miles from where I live in Mount's Bay. So for all I know, what I've learned on my rocks and beaches may be useless if you fish in the *terra incognita* that lies east of the Tamar – or even east of Helston. I doubt it. It's not as if I'm baiting up with lugworm pasties or using lures that sing Trelawney, so I reckon a lot of my dodges should work almost anywhere. But I don't have the wet boots experience to back up my view; and that might be important, because some of my ideas seem to be at odds with the conventional wisdom.

SONG OF THE SOLITARY BASS FISHER

I've read the classic writers – Clive Gammon, Des Brennan, John Darling, Mike Ladle – and they've given me a solid grounding of knowledge. But I'm a tinkerer, so I've used that grounding to build very personal approaches to my sport, especially in dodgy conditions. When I run into other fishers in a calm or a raging storm, they describe what I'm doing as interesting (if they're diplomatic), weird (if they're less guarded), or downright barking daft (if they're the sort of straight-talkers who call a spade a bloody shovel). I know my sometimes unusual and somewhat self-taught Cornish methods work for me. I can only hope they'll work for you too.

Second, I never fish from boats. About forty-five years ago my brother and I ran a charter-boat in East Africa, and that cured me of any possible wish to have a boat again. You don't really own a boat, it owns you. So unless you enjoy all the maintenance and trailing and suchlike, buying a boat's like starting a prison sentence. And I'm not interested in fishing from other people's boats either. A local skipper tells me his clients come back at the end of a trip and say, 'I caught a cod'; and he thinks, 'No you didn't, I caught a cod, you just reeled it in.' I'm with the skipper: finding the fish is the challenge and the fun, and I'm not going to pay a hefty charter fee to miss out on it.

Third, I don't fish live-bait very much. I hate carrying stuff, the idea of setting out like a rod-toting window-cleaner or ice-cream seller, with a big bucket or a cold-box, would be enough to keep me at home. When I come across a promising live-bait – a whiting that snaffles my worms, a sandeel scraped at the water's edge, a small mackerel or pollack that grabs my lure, a prawn or blenny in a rock-pool – I use it. But live-baiting isn't one of my staples even though I know it can be a terrific way of getting into the fish.

Fourth, as the years go by I fish more with bait than with lures or the fly. When conditions look spot-on I still take the lure-rod or the fly-rod for a wander, but my default setting's to head for a beach. I just enjoy it more. A lot of the challenges around lures and the fly are physical – mud-tromping along the coastal footpath, scrambling

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over slippery rocks in the dark, casting a plug into a tight spot in a gusty cross-wind, flicking a fly-line through a raging hoolie, ice-dancing on wet seaweed – which may be why younger, more athletic fishers are such fans. On the beach I do a good deal of walking – to find the fish, the better surf, the weed-free patch – but the real exercise is in the head. It's all about wondering what to try next, what the bass could be eating, where the food might be concentrating. And as I grow older I seem to prefer the mental workout.

Lastly, I'm sure I don't always fish in the most productive way, I fish in the way that makes me happiest. For instance I focus mostly on early mornings, from a couple of hours before first light. Why? Well, I catch my fair share of decent bass in that slot, and I'm pretty convinced they feed harder in the last hours of darkness than at any other time. But mostly it's because I love early mornings, when there's nobody else around, when the seals are so laid back that they sit beside me on the shore, and when I know I'll see a sunrise and a steaming hot coffee at the end of my outing.



Some folk likely will find the how-and-why stuff boring, so I've included lots of fishing stories to illustrate the way I approach my sport. They're in italics. For obvious reasons they tell of successful outings. We all have bad days, but I try not to dwell too much on the trip when I caught one tiddler and a load of weed, lost a favourite lure, half-drowned in the rain, ripped my waders on a bramble, dropped my tackle-bag in dog poo, and found my car wouldn't start. When the fishing's rotten I hope I learn something about my marks, but writing or reading about a good bass is a lot more fun.

So with all those disclaimers why am I bothering to write a book? Definitely not because I think I know everything about bass fishing. Nobody does, nobody ever will, and if they did, I'd take up snooker or competitive leek-growing instead. Bass are always going to be somewhat mysterious, that's why it's such fun to chase

them. Some folk, often fishing guides, say you just need to work out 'the pattern'. Then you'll know where, when, and how to make guaranteed catches. I look at these confident assertions the same way I listen to investment bankers telling me they can predict the stock market. The pattern or the financial model is bang-on when you look at what's happened in the past. And when you look at what might happen tomorrow or next week, it's about as reliable as an election manifesto, a weight loss advertisement, or a drunken palm-reader with a fraud conviction. I don't think anyone can say with confidence what bass will do, and I'm entirely sure I can't.

No, I'm putting my ideas on paper because a lot of people have asked me to do just that. I've posted catch reports on a couple of forum sites, always with a bit of background about how I caught the fish. Then other fishers have sent me messages: 'I read what you did and I thought you were totally nuts. But I was blanking, so I decided to try some of your loopy ideas. Guess what, I had three good bass. You should write a book.' One chap suggested I collect all my posts and just bodge them together.

But that really didn't work. Quite a few of my write-ups were foul-mouthed rants about the odd half-wit surfer who manages to run over my line three times in succession on a two mile beach, or the abject dirt-bags who leave bait wrappers and balls of mono on my favourite rock marks; and most were about well-sized bass, because forum-readers always want a photo of a whopper. But a lot of my best catches have been nothing-special fish winkled out against the odds, and a lot of my best trips have been when I managed to help another fisher break a run of blanks. And I've realised that the greatest pleasure I take from my outings is when I can give someone a tip that turns defeat into victory. Best of all is when the other bod's a youngster. Grown-ups have learned to play life a bit cool (as in, 'What a pleasant surprise, I'm really quite chuffed'), but juniors wear their hearts on their sleeves (as in, 'That's totally out-effing-rageous, this is the best day of my whole life, and I'm in love with that bass.').

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First light on a summer morning, I was wandering along a rough and weedy stretch in Mount's Bay, tossing a little Toby whenever I saw a swirl. The bay was jumping with whitebait, every predator in the sea had come to join the feast. I had a couple of mackerel, a pollack, and a few bass. Nothing enormous, just some good eating fish, so I kept the mackerel and a bass. Rounding an outcrop I ran into a lad of about fourteen so I stopped for a chat. He was on holiday, this was his first outing with a brand new outfit. He'd saved his newspaper-round money for a year to pay for it, and he'd chosen his rod, reel, braid, and lures after days of research in the on-line forums. He was fishing a big shallow-diving plug, something Japanese, expensive, and about five inches long. He'd caught two pollack and a mackerel. He looked at my bag. 'Is that a bass?' Wide-eyed, he might have been asking if it were a mermaid, a unicorn, a pterodactyl. I told him the bass seemed to be locked in on the whitebait, so he might want to try a much smaller lure, something like a wee Toby. 'I haven't got one of those, I don't think anyone on my websites mentioned them.' I gave him a twenty gramme silver and white job (my desert island lure) and sat down for a smoke. Third cast and his rod bowed over with those slow hefty thumps that tell you it's a bass. It was one fat lady, maybe three-and-a-half pounds. That young chap was like the Cheshire Cat, whenever I walk past the outcrop I can still see the smile on his face.

One more caveat, people sometimes say my views are a bit tentative, that I reckon something, I believe something else, and there's not a whole lot that I really claim to know for sure. Fair comment. And no apology. I'm not a bass after all, just a chap with a fishing rod, so no certainties from my end, just opinions and experiences. But here's what I hope this book might do. I hope a few bass fishers – novices or old-stagers – will pick up some ideas that give them better outings and more fish, without a visit to the supermarket seafood counter, the poor-house, or the psychiatrist. Because helping someone land a