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Fool's Gold: Supplemental Forage for a Bass Pond

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One of the most common problems for pond owners is that the bass aren't big enough. Many times, pond owners have a pond that is chock-

full of 12 inch bass, and a fish can be caught on nearly every cast. Even after years of catch and release these bass still aren't getting any bigger and they are SKIN-NY. To correct the problem, the thought for many pond owners is to stock supplemental forage (bait fish).

Commercial hatcheries usually offer a variety of supplemental forage including fathead minnows, golden shiners, or shad. They may also offer several sunfish species to correct the problem. These bait fish are usually very expensive but seldom ever solve the problem.

Fathead minnows are probably the most popular supplemental forage fish stocked for bass, but the problem with fatheads is twofold. First, they are too slow and get eaten before they have a chance to reproduce and become established. Second, they are small and only feed the fingerling bass in the pond. This does nothing for the average-sized bass in the pond that is trying to be grown.

Another baitfish commonly

stocked is the golden shiner. This fish is faster and escapes predation enough to become established, but is not a prolific spawner. Golden shiners only spawn one time per year and do not produce enough offspring to effectively feed a bass population.

Shad usually aren't a good option for a bass pond either. We have two species of shad in Oklahoma, gizzard and threadfin. The gizzard shad is most common and is found throughout the state. The downside is that they grow fast and too big (up to 2 pounds) for most bass in a pond. They tie up biomass that never gets converted to your bass population. Threadfin shad are different. They are smaller and provide excellent forage during the summertime. The only problem is summer is the only time of year they will live in Oklahoma ponds. When water temperature falls below 42 degrees, threadies will die off. Consequently, they must be stocked every spring to provide supplemental forage through the summer which can be very costly.

So, if supplemental forage isn't a good option to make bass grow bigger, what will? A good balanced bluegill population. Not green sunfish, not hybrid sunfish, just bluegill. Bluegill reproduce like crazy and are the foundation of any respectable bass pond. For example, 20 pairs of adult bluegill stocked in a 1/2 acre hatchery pond will produce up to 300,000 fingerling bluegill. That's enough to

feed an entire army of bass! But if the bluegill population in a pond gets out of whack, bass growth can suffer. This can be due to poor spawning habitat, too much or too little cover (20% of surface area vegetated is ideal), or too many bass preying on them.



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Bluegill sunfish are the best way to grow larger farm pond bass.

Therefore, if a pond has skinny bass or they aren't getting as big as they should, the bluegill population is the likely culprit. Make sure you are seeing several different sizes of bluegill and be sure they have adequate spawning habitat and cover. A lot of the time, the problem is there are just too many bass in the pond, and the bluegill population can't support all of them. Sometimes as many as 100 bass per acre need to be removed. By removing some of these small skinny bass, the bluegill population will increase and become more balanced. In addition, you will be providing a feast not only for your family but also the remaining bass in your pond!