

A Top 20 Lake

Bull Shoals Lake leaps to 18th on Bassmaster's best-of list



Professional bass fisherman Mike Iaconelli lands a bass on Bull Shoals Lake during a Bassmaster tournament. Bull Shoals Lake catapulted to No. 18 on Bassmaster Magazine's 2013 ranking of America's Top 100 Lakes for Bass Fishing. / Kevin Pieper/The Baxter Bulletin

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Bull Shoals Lake catapulted to No. 18 on Bassmaster Magazine's 2013 ranking of America's Top 100 Lakes for Bass Fishing.

The ranking story that will be published in the magazine's June edition is in the mail to subscribers now. The ranking — derived with input from anglers, sports writers, editors and biologists — found Bull Shoals at No. 51 last year. Before that, the lake hadn't been on the Bassmaster radar screen at all.

Bassmaster editor James Hall accurately predicted a year ago the lake's ascent as a top destination place for bass fishing.

"I would not at all be surprised to see Bull Shoals move up on the list next year after seeing the quality of fish in the tournament," Hall said in 2012. The event and nearly 80 pounds of bass caught by Brandon Palaniuk of Rothdrum, Idaho, was enough to deliver the second-year BASS angler his first Elite Series win and \$100,000.

This year, a day's weather delay and a 36-hour, 4-foot rise in the lake on April 19 and 20 created an extraordinary challenge for a field of 100 anglers. It also put the limelight on another rookie, Oklahoma angler Jason Christie, who's fished a dozen BASS events, won three and made the final cut four times. He started the final day of fishing in the BASS Ramada Quest tournament in 11th place in a field of 12 anglers.

"It was the greatest comeback ever," Hall said. "Jason is dominant now."

Before the Bull Shoals event, no BASS tournament angler had ever moved from a place lower than sixth place to a first-place finish. Christie's win came on the heels of an April 14 win in the the Walmart FLW Tour on Beaver Lake.

Kelley Linck of Yellville, director of the Ozark Mountain Region marketing leg of Arkansas Parks and Tourism, said Bull Shoals Lake's "rebirth" is a phenomenon that only Mother Nature can provide.

"Out of all the bad things that Mother Nature brings — three horrible floods — something good comes," Linck said. "The lake is so big there's nothing anyone can do to change the number and size of fish like the high water."

Kevin Eastwold, a partner in the family-owned Bull Shoals Boat Dock, said the lake's presence on the Bassmaster Magazine's list will produce a measurable increase in angler interest in fishing the lake.

"The years of high water made for awesome spawning. The fry had brush to hide out in along the shore lines," Eastwold said. "The 3- and 4-year-old bass that are three and half pounds now will be 6- to 8-pounders in a couple more years."

Hall calls Bull Shoals Lake "the ultimate pattern" fishing lake.

"When you catch a good fish in 15 feet of water off a rocky point on a certain color bait in certain water temps and clarity — when you find the pattern — even the average angler will catch fish till his arms fall off," Hall said. "That's why our anglers drool for the fishing on Bull Shoals."

Hall said the idea for ranking the best lakes emerged at a B.A.S.S. tournament during a lively discussion among outdoor writers with definite ideas about the nation's top performing lakes. Hall decided the debate warranted a more in-depth investigation.

To rank the lakes, Bassmaster tapped the U.S. Department of Natural Resources for what it believes to be the five most productive lakes in each state based on electroshock surveys and angler catch rates.

B.A.S.S. Federation Nation presidents offered top lake recommendations based on tournament catches, while conservation directors supplied details on lake accessibility and best fish-stocking practices.