

# Largemouth *as the* MAIN COURSE

JOHN RANDOLPH

*Mexico's Mateos and  
El Salto lakes  
define ideal  
popper fishing.*



THE KER-BURBLE SOUND OF A Balsa-wood popper chugged deeply and slowly on a glassy lake can be hypnotic. In the morning calm you imagine a 5- to 10-pound largemouth under the fly—examining it hungrily. You await what may inevitably follow: a large hole in the water and a loud *ker-splosh*, then a leaping yellow-sided fish the size of a shovel. There are so few places where you can find largemouth bass in large numbers and sizes that special waters like the Sacramento Delta and Mexico's Mateos and El Salto lakes have become holy waters to bass fishers.

The Mexican lakes have been famous for two decades among conventional bass anglers, but so far they have seen few fly fishers. The numbers of bass taken per day on spin and level-wind gear tell a story: They range from 40 to 90 fish weighing from 2 to 10 pounds or larger. But little information was available on the lake *fly catches* until the waters were explored by Keith Kaneko of Angling on the Fly, who has fished them repeatedly over the past three years with other expert fly anglers. I fished both lakes with Keith on an exploratory trip in January 2008.

Lakes El Salto and Mateos (650 miles south of Nogales, Texas) are man-made earth-dam lakes built in 1983 and 1967, in the foothills of the Sierra Madre Mountains in Sinaloa Province, near Mazatlán and Culiacán on the west coast of Mexico. Both were built for irrigation of the rich

*With largemouth bass fishing exploding in popularity, U.S. fly fishers are looking for the world's best destinations to catch them. Mexico's El Salto and Mateos (left) lakes provide breathtaking scenery and the opportunity to catch the bass of a lifetime. Keith Kaneko photo, John Sherman photo (inset)*



province lowlands and both held a native largemouth bass species to which the Florida strain of largemouth were added (Mateos in 1975 and El Salto in 1985) to feed on a rich forage base of tilapia and shad. Both lakes are gillnetted commercially for tilapia, but this controlled fishery does not seem to affect the largemouth that compete with and feed on the tilapia. Cropping the overproductive, and predacious, tilapia may actually improve the bass fishery.

## Mateos

THE LAKE (FULL NAME: PRESA ADOLFO LÓPEZ MATEOS) 55 minutes by car from Culiacán has a full pool 50 miles long and 3 to 4 miles wide (55,000 acres), with an estimated 100 miles or more of shoreline and fertile bass and shorebird habitat, including clear water, drowned trees, hyacinth-choked coves, islands, shallows, submerged brush, rocky and gravelly shorelines and headlands, bluffs, islands, and flooded canyons.

In early January when the purple, yellow, and white *Amapa* trees flower along the rugged surrounding mountains, the lake has an aura of Taoist enchantment, especially in early morning and evening when the sunlight is soft and angular, the lake is quiet, bobcats prowl the shorelines, great blue herons stalk silently, and white pelican flocks sail overhead like animated clouds.

[Sinaloa province, with 13 rivers and 15 lakes, is called the "water capital" of dry Mexico. Lake Mateos is fed by the Tamazula and Humaya rivers. THE EDITOR.]

Mateos is a reborn largemouth fishery. In the '80s and '90s its fishery, once known for fish over 10 pounds, crashed due to severe droughts and excessive drawdown for irrigation. But during the past three years, monsoon-like rains have refilled the lake and revived the fishery and Mateos is rapidly recovering its large-fish reputation.

Recent recorded catches of 8- to 10-pound bass confirm this. The lake largemouth record weighed over 16 pounds. In years past, a gear angler took 27 bass of 10



Mateos and El Salto bass (above) grow large foraging on tilapia. Both lakes are fished commercially for tilapia, an important food fish.

pounds or more in six days of fishing in May. Two were over 15 pounds.

Mateos is again a largemouth-producing factory, where large schools of shad and tilapia are attacked by bass and bait-feeding waterfowl. At bass spawning time (February and March) the large tilapia surround the bass spawning nests and dash in repeatedly to devour the eggs. This is the predator/prey relationship that contributes to the Mateos fisheries balance. The gillnetting may actually help to control tilapia predation on the bass.

To catch bass on topwater flies, cast near shoreline structure and retrieve the fly near or in hyacinths, submerged brush, and drowned trees.



# FLIES & Hooks

Wide-gap hooks are important because largemouth bass have large and tough mouths and the hair on many bass flies reduces the effective distance between the shank and the hook point, thus reducing hook purchase when you strike. Effective flies on El Salto and Mateos include: (topwater) Leo's Popper (#2), Pike Fly (#1/0), Swimming Frog (#2, white belly and chartreuse belly), Dahlberg's Diving Minnow (#4, silver), Pencil Popper Shad (#6), Owens Silver Shiner Popper (#6, gray/white), Shenandoah Chugger (#4, grayscale), Blados Grease Fly (#1/0, silver), and Todd Wiggle Minnow (#6, shad). Leo Gutierrez's poppers are also top producers on these lakes.



Bass bugs are bushy and wind-resistant. Bring 8-weight rods and bass-taper fly lines and use 20-pound tippet material to deal with the weeds and brush in the water. Choose flies with weedguards or add them yourself.

Subsurface flies should include: Whitlock's Hare Grub (#2, Motor Oil), especially effective "on the drop;" Blanton's FT Whistler (#2/0, red/white), Clouser Minnow (#2, chartreuse/white); Barr's Meat Whistle (3/0, crawdad); Gummy Minnow (#2, and chubby sizes—green); Burk's Hotflash Minnow (#4, threadfin shad); Miller's Mighty Minnow (#4, tan/white and all white).

If your patterns do not come with weedguards, tie them on yourself using 20- to 25-pound stiff mono.



Ironically, both Mateos and El Salto lakes have floating gillnets in virtually every cove—so many of them that first-time bass fishers wonder how the bass can survive. They obviously do and in surprising numbers, sizes, and fighting energy. Expectations on a normal day of fishing (fishing daylight to 11:30 A.M., lunch/siesta, then fishing again 1 to 5 P.M.) include: 40 to 75 largemouth hooked on conventional gear and 10 to 30 on fly.

## El Salto

EL SALTO, LOCATED 75 MILES NORTHEAST OF MAZATLÁN AT THE base of the Sierra Madre Mountains, is famous for its high numbers of largemouth, and especially large fish. [During the past two years over half the visiting El Salto conventional anglers averaged at least one 10-pound-plus fish on a three-day stay. The record El Salto largemouth weighed 18 pounds, 5 ounces. The best five-fish single-day catch weighed a combined total of 53 pounds, 5 ounces. THE EDITOR.]



El Salto (20 miles long, 24,000 acres, and more than 45 miles of shoreline) has a gentler surrounding profile than Mateos, but its lake structure and turbid, food-rich waters create perhaps the richest largemouth habitat in the world: Abundant drowned forests, steep butte faces, islands, canyons, and bays hold so many fishing locations that anglers can explore and fish for days and not intrude on another boat.

Experienced anglers (fly and gear fishers share the waters) do extremely well on both Mateos and El Salto lakes. Beginners and intermediates can expect lower catch rates because largemouth occupy the submerged structure as well as shorelines. Because bass are ambush predators, casting accuracy is demanding for both gear and fly fishers, confirming the old saying: "The difference between a great bass fisher and a good one is two inches (in casting accuracy)."

Gear fishers outcatch fly fishers on these lakes because when the bass are off the bite in the shallows, they continue feeding in the deeper structure, especially along submerged headlands where deepwater lures are fished (walked) upward along the structure. Because fly fishers prefer poppers and other floating flies, and the explosive visual takes they bring, they work the shallows almost exclusively. Fishing flies vertically in the water column or





El Salto Lodge (above) has hillside patios overlooking the lake, comfortable accommodations, and fine American/Mexican cuisine. The new Anglers Inn Lodge at Mateos Lake (below) offers similar services and accommodations.

## ACCOMMODATIONS & SERVICE

The new Anglers Inn Lodge and cabins (capacity 12 to 22 anglers) are located on the banks overlooking the Humaya River near the outflow of Lake Mateos and offer: air-conditioned doubles, TV, tiled floors, full private baths, and excellent daily maid service. Outside daytime temperatures range (January through March) from 75 to 85 degrees F.

All services (including daily laundry) and meals are included in the prices, and prompt service is provided by an energetic and friendly Mexican staff. The lodge menu is American/Mexican and excellent. Noon meals are served in the lodge and plentiful bottled water is supplied in the rooms and while fishing.

The lodge has a fully stocked tackle shop, mini spa, free wireless Internet, and cellular service is available, as is professional massage (additional fee). A lodge shuttle service provides transportation to and from Culiacán airport.

The modern, airy Mexican-style El Salto Lodge sits on a hill facing the lake and offers similar accommodations, cuisine, and professional services to Mateos. Its hilltop patios, gardens, and views provide places to daydream.



The record Mateos bass weighed more than 16 pounds. Skilled fly fishers should expect to catch 10 to 30 bass per day during the best months (October through April) with regular catches of 4- to 6-pound bass (right) and shots at 10-pound bass.



on long, super-fast-sinking heads has not been explored on the lakes, probably because the popping-bug fishing is so exceptional. [Fly fishers are required to take fly gear exclusively.] THE EDITOR.]

How good must your casting be on both Mateos and El Salto? You should be able to cast relatively bulky flies at least 60 feet to within 2 inches of cover. Fishing is from stable Bass Tracker johnboats (equipped with 48-horsepower Yamaha outboards) to rocky, brushy shorelines, drowned trees, and flotillas of weedmats.

The longer your cast, the longer your retrieve. The longer your retrieve, the more water you cover—and the more time you give largemouth to hear, follow, and suddenly ambush your fly, often near your rod tip. Short, inaccurate casts do poorly on these largemouth waters.

The fishing involves casting your fly onto the bank, then hopping it offshore onto calm water; letting it sit; chugging it hard; letting it sit again; twitching it slightly; then chugging it hard again, always waiting for the explosive splash/strike. The fishing demands concentrated, enervating, high-energy work. By evening, warm and pleasant exhaustion makes the lodge lights beckon.

“THE FISHING DEMANDS CONCENTRATED, ENERVATING, HIGH-ENERGY WORK.”



Mateos and El Salto have native Mexican largemouth (above) and Florida-strain largemouth which were introduced in 1975 and 1985 respectively.

## Why Florida Strain?

MEXICAN-STRAIN LARGEMOUTH HAVE DIFFERENT MARKINGS AND their fights are bullish, but they do not grow as fast as Florida-strain fish (2- to 3-pound growths per year for Florida; 1 to 2 pounds per year for Mexican bass). Florida-strain bass are the hardest-fighting, highest-jumping largemouth, and landing 8-pound-plus fish on these structure-rich lakes requires strong rods, sharp hook-sets, tough fighting skills, strong wide-gap hooks, and luck. Largemouths do not take you into your backing: They jump and make fast brute charges into cover. Break-offs in submerged brush and timber are the norm.

## Guides

THE GUIDES AT BOTH LAKES ARE EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONALS. Lake Mateos currently has one experienced fly-fishing guide (with more in training to service the new lodge) and El Salto has seven. The guides speak enough

English, and they are excellent boat handlers and understand fly fishing, where the fish are, and how to position the boat in the wind for both right- and left-hand casters. The guides express appreciation when casts are accurate, and grab a boat net immediately when you hook a large fish. Their judgments on estimated fish sizes are unerring.

The best period for surface fishing at both lodges is from January through March, during prespawn when fish are at their heaviest, although there is excellent topwater fishing from October through April 30.

## Tackle & Gear

FOR SURFACE FISHING WE USED SAGE'S 8 1/2-FOOT LARGEMOUTH Bass rods matched with 330-grain Bass Taper floating fly lines, Rio Striped Bass 7-foot leaders (22-pound-test), or Gutterres's twisted leaders (20-pound-test) tippet.

For subsurface fishing, we used Sage's saltwater 9-foot 8-weight Xi2 or Z-Axis with Rio Outbound (type 3) or Rio Tropical Saltwater with Rio Fluoroflex 15-pound-test tippet. Comparable stiff-butt 8 1/2- or 9-foot (4-piece) rods, lines, and leaders serve equally well.

## Packages

ANGLERS INN FLY-FISHING OPERATIONS ON BOTH LAKES ARE booked exclusively through Angling on the Fly (anglingonthefly.com). A four-day three-night package to El Salto or Mateos is \$2,015 per angler. A six-day, five-night package to both El Salto and Mateos is \$3,195. Rates do not include airfare or gratuities. Saltwater fishing is also available at Mazatlán, along with shopping and other attractions for nonfishers.

West Coast anglers should book flights direct to Culiacán to fish Mateos and direct to Mazatlán for fishing El Salto (this avoids flying to Mexico City, then by regional airline to Mazatlán or Culiacán). East Coast anglers must fly to Mexico City then short-hop to Culiacán or Mazatlán depending on the lake. The lodges provide pick-up and return to local airports in comfortable air-conditioned vans.

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