



THE SMALLMOUTH HORIZON

Helping to Protect and Preserve Quality Smallmouth Bass Fishing

November 2013

A December to Remember: Blade Baits and Reservoir Smallmouth

By Jeff Little

Looking back at the past year, I realize that I have learned more since last March than in the previous five years combined. The switch from river to reservoir smallmouth fishing brought an entirely new set of rules, patterns, and techniques. The technique that I learned late in the year, vertical jigging a blade bait, has yielded the most consistent action so far.

I first learned about blade baits, specifically the silver buddy, about 8 years ago. I had launched my kayak in Mattawoman Creek, a tributary of the tidal Potomac River to catch some largemouth. Unfortunately, the skunk must have hopped aboard my kayak that early December morning. But I did get a chance to learn something by talking to some other anglers. They reported catching several chunky largemouth on the lip of a drop off next to the channel. While bobbing up and down in my kayak beside the big bass boat, I asked the two anglers if I could see what they were using. It was a gold silver buddy.

Later that week, I purchased several of these heavy, clunky baits. The next opportunity I had to try them was on the upper Potomac near Hancock, Mary-

land. Using them for the first time, I thought back to remember how the tidal largemouth anglers had jigged them. I recalled a short cast, a pendulum swing, and regular short rips up off the bottom.

I tried this out, and snagged on almost every cast for the next half hour. Then I tied on a tube and forgot about the lure that aggravated me so much. Fast forward almost 8 years to early November of this year. On the reservoir, I had found recent success with crankbaits, catching several nice smallmouth, and two 22 inch largemouth.



From mid October though early November, I was able to connect at least 3 times a day with a decent largemouth or smallmouth. More importantly, I had overcome my aversion to crankbaits. I knew that they caught big fish, but previously would not throw due to the frustration of snagging and having so many fish throw the bait. I was able to land almost every fish thanks to having the right tool for the job: a 7 foot fiberglass crankbait casting rod. Before this fall,

I had used the wrong rod for crankbaiting: medium heavy graphite jig rods. The fiberglass rod threw the big deep divers a long way, and bowed to a hooked fish which prevented the frustration of seeing a big hooked fish get off. I had a new confidence bait in the deep diving crankbait.

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While throwing the big white Norman crankbait parallel to a 45 degree rocky shoreline, I noticed an electric boat angler nearby. His fishing line angle was steeper than the contour of the bank I was working. He would cast a short distance, let the bait fall, and then pop his rod tip upward a short distance and repeat. I started paddling across the reservoir to a point I wanted to fish when this angler started motoring in my direction. As we passed, we greeted each other and eventually stopped to talk about the day's patterns. While talking, the angler mentioned that come December, the only bait he will throw will be the blade bait. He showed me a tray full of them in many different colors. He poured, painted, and assembled them himself. He also explained the technique for fishing them:

Cast out a short distance, let the bait fall on a taught line, waiting for the feel of the bait hitting the bottom, lift the rod tip up quickly, but stop as soon as you feel two of the vibrations that the bait makes while it swims. Follow the lure back down to the bottom with your rod tip on taught line. This drop is usually when the bait gets nailed, so make sure you don't drop your rod tip faster than the lure sinks. Any slack in the line may mean a missed hit. If the lure stops short of where you remember the bottom being, set the hook because the silver buddy is in a fish's mouth! He emphasized several times to only let the lure vibrate two times on the rip upward.

I skeptically asked if they were worth the effort. I explained that I had tried them before, and like crankbaits, I got frustrated with how often they snagged. He leaned down to his carpeted boat deck, and picked up a thick little chunk of lead with a paper clip molded into it. He explained that he did snag routinely, but they usually come off easily under their own weight. But if they did not come free on their own, the little chunk of lead slid down the line would knock it free every time. He mentioned a few times that the casting angle has a lot to do with how often you snag.

Steeper line angles mean fewer snags. That is probably what I was doing wrong on the upper Potomac 8 years prior. It's probably not the best lure for shallow river fishing unless you cast and retrieve like a spinnerbait. I plan on trying just that next spring with a few of the lighter weight blade baits, as the action resembles that of a rattle trap.

Knowing that I would probably snag several of them permanently, I decided to make the blade baits expendable. The following week, I ordered the lead pouring mold for blade baits. I had to use my dremmel tool to open the bottleneck of the pour funnel on the mold. With the plate coming so close to the opening, I did not get good pours initially. I eventually poured enough so that I would not worry if I lost a few. Along with the plates and mold that I ordered from Barlow's tackle, I purchased some adhesive scale tape for added reflectivity. I also ordered short shank trebles in the hopes that a shorter hook would snag less.



After pouring the lead onto the plate, apply reflective scale tape or glittery paint, a line tie clip, split rings, short shank trebles, and paint the eyes.

As Steve, the electric boat angler mentioned, casting angle played the biggest role in how often you snag. The first day using them, I only had three of them with me. My order from Barlow's had not arrived at that point. I had two gold ones that I was able to dig up from 8 years prior, and one that Steve had given

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me. I thought for sure that I would be out of them in the first hour or so. As it turned out, I used the same one all day and never lost it. I did bring a stump up from 53 feet, but I did not lose a single bait in over 8 hours of fishing. I snagged every few minutes all day long, but they usually came free as soon as I jiggled the rod tip, or changed my line angle a little bit. Although I did not lose a bait that first day, I also did not catch a smallmouth with one.

On the more difficult snags, the lead weight and paperclip bait knocker did a good job knocking the bait free. What was nice about this home-made plug knocker was that it was inexpensive, and you didn't need to worry about an attached string to tangle up in your boat. From Steve's brief description of how to make the blade bait knocker, I was able to make a few. His directions were: drill a 2 inch deep hole in a 2 x 4 with a 1 inch bit, pour hot lead into the hole, and hold the paperclip in the hot lead with pliers, making sure that one end of the clip is bent out so you can slip the weight onto you line. I had to bang on the 2 x 4 with a hammer to get it out.



Homemade bait knockers help free snagged blade baits without the tangles of a standard plug knocker.

The next day on the reservoir, I stuck with the blade bait even though I had been skunked a week prior. By then I had poured, decorated, and assembled several blade baits from 3/8 oz to 3/4 oz. That day it was windy, so I used the heavier ones to keep the line taught and stay in contact with the bottom. During the prior week, I did a Google search on blade baits and read several articles. One of them said that most anglers rip blade baits too hard and too far. I decided to tone it down a little. It paid off, as I caught four smallmouth, the largest being a 16 inch.

The next weekend out, I ended up catching seven smallmouth, and a few largemouth. None of them were very big, but seven smallmouth in a day was one of my better numbers days this year on the reservoir. I found myself making the pop off the bottom shorter and shorter. Some of the hits came on slow, gently lifts four inches or less off the bottom. I got used to what "normal" felt like in terms of the cadence of lift, lower, clank on rock, lift, lower, clank, lift lower, clank.... When something felt a little bit different, I set the hook.



This 18.5 incher thumped the blade bait on a short quick hop off the bottom.

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I got into a rhythm of lift, lower, clank, and the lifts became smaller and smaller until I just felt like I was trying to get as many close bottom touches as possible. I wasn't dragging it as I would drift and drag a tube, but it was seldom more than an inch or two off the bottom. It reminded me of what my friend Brook Hoover does with a ball head jig and soft plastic when winter fishing on the Susquehanna River. He gets the jig to the bottom, settled against a rock, and shakes his rod tip rapidly on a taught line. The rod tip does not move back and forth more than 2 inches, and the bait stays in place rattling and clicking its lead against the rock, drawing in fish.

The next fish hit so softly that the only difference I felt was an interruption of my tiny lift, lower, and clank. I imagined the bait laying on its side, then the plate going upright without leaving the bottom, and then laying back down. I didn't feel it lay back down. Not sure if it was a fish, I set the hook. Honestly, I fully expected to feel the rapid vibration of the bait ripping several feet up off the bottom. Instead, I felt that the lure was snagged. Then the snag throbbed, my rod tip dipped, and my drag went ZZZZiiiiing!

After the 20 inch reservoir smallmouth dipped the first few inches of my spinning rod into the water a few times, I netted the fish and headed toward the shoreline to take a picture.

Although I have only four full days of blade bait fishing under my belt, this simple yet effective bait is my confidence bait of choice for fishing deep reservoir structure. But I have to wonder, is this just a cold water bait, or will it work next June after the spawn wraps up? I plan on finding out.



This 20 inch reservoir smallmouth softly took a 3/4 oz blade bait that was jiggled on the rocks of a mid reservoir ledge peak 40 feet down.

Jeff "Yakfish" Little is owner of Blue Ridge Kayak Fishing LLC www.blueridgekayakfishing.com, which provides kayak fishing instruction for river smallmouth, tidal largemouth, and reservoir bass in Maryland and Virginia.

There, you will also find a link to Confidence Baits which sells his DVD's.

Bad weather always looks worse through a window.

Our Next Meeting:

**Tuesday
November 19th**

Smallmouth Bass Fisheries of Central Wisconsin

Al Niebur, DNR Fisheries biologist

Smallmouth bass in smaller, wadeable streams and rivers can offer some very unique, and often overlooked, fishing opportunities for anglers.

Al is a fisheries biologist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and has worked in Wisconsin for over 21 years stationed at various field offices including; Wautoma, Peshtigo, and currently Shawano.

He manages fishery resources in the numerous streams, rivers, and lakes of Waupaca and Shawano Counties. Al has also taught as an adjunct instructor for fisheries related coursework at Fox Valley Technical College.

He will discuss smallmouth bass population characteristics, habitat, seasonal movement, and fishing access in several wadeable streams of Central Wisconsin.



Upcoming Meetings:

Nov 19th	WSA - Al Niebur	Feb 18th	WSA - Ron Barefield
Nov 27th	BFF - Tony Ferrie, Simms Fishing Products	March 18th	WSA - Mike Jacobs
Dec 17th	WSA/BFF Holiday Party	April 15th	WSA Annual Fundraiser Auction
Jan 21st	WSA - T.b.a.		

Wisconsin Smallmouth Alliance meetings are normally held on the third Tuesday of each month. The Badger Fly Fishers meet on the fourth Monday.

Both groups meet at the Mapletree Restaurant on Highway 51, in McFarland, Wisconsin. Programs begin at 7:00 p.m., dinner at 6:00 p.m. **Visitors and guests are always welcome!**