



THE SMALLMOUTH HORIZON

Helping to Protect and Preserve Quality Smallmouth Bass Fishing

December 2014

Please join us on Tuesday, December 16th for our holiday party.

It will be an evening of holiday fun and fellowship at the Mapletree Restaurant in McFarland. Bring your spouse or a friend.

Arrive by 6:00 p.m. for cocktails, dinner will be served at 6:30. Cost is \$18 per person and includes chicken, fish, roast beef, potato, soup/salad bar, coffee and dessert (Grasshoppers or N. York Cheese-cake).

Please bring cash (exact amount is appreciated) or a check to the **WSA**, so that we can make a single payment to the Mapletree. Tip is included and a reservation is not necessary.

Our after dinner speaker is Tim Eisle, freelance outdoor writer and photographer from Madison, shows how he and his wife, Linda, restored prairie on their land in Crawford County.

The Eisele's own 100 acres in the Town of Seneca in Crawford County, about one mile east of the Mississippi River. This part of the state, known as the Driftless Region, was not covered by glaciers during the most recent Ice Age, and is characterized with steep ridges, wooded hillsides and deep valleys.

At one time the land had been a cornfield and prior to the Eiseles' ownership was cool season grasses, goldenrod and shrubs, but now is restored to prairie. The goal was to restore warm season grasses, forbs and increase the bio-diversity of the land.

This 45 minute PowerPoint presentation, uses photographs to show what the land was like originally when the Eisele's purchased it in 1990, how the vegetation was changing and the process of spraying with Roundup, a controlled burn and disking the soil. The



seed was then hand sowed, and the results are shown in color photos with many close-up photos of flowers and grasses. Viewers will see the required upkeep along with the insects, birds and wildlife that use the prairie.

In 2005, Tim and Linda Eisele were selected for the Wisconsin Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation's Wild Turkey Woodland Owners of the Year Award, and in 2011 they received the Forestry Award from the Crawford County Land Conservation Department. In 2011, Tim received the Madison Audubon Society's James Zimmerman Award for Excellence in Environmental Communication.

It's Time To Renew Your Membership!

Our membership year runs from January 1 through December 31. We rely on membership dues and our bucket raffles to fund our speakers and our newsletter. Now is the time to renew for the coming year! Please support the Smallmouth Alliance. You can renew at the next meeting, or use the form enclosed in this newsletter. Be sure to include your email address. Thank you for your continued support!

YES, I WANT TO RENEW MY MEMBERSHIP!

One year \$20 Three years \$50

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Articles, photos, and calendar events for the newsletter are encouraged and should be submitted by the 1st day of the month to: Dan Johnson, 426 Glenway St. Madison, WI 53711. Send to: johnson7@tds.net, editor.

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Afflicted: A Primer for Winter River Smallmouth Fishing, part 2

By Jeff Little

Continued from last month.

What Does It Feel Like? (Brace Yourself)

The biggest hurdle a winter bass angler has to overcome is confidence; knowing that it can and should happen. Before these anglers experience some success, they often second guess. "Was that a hit?" Knowing what a hit (better termed a "take") feels like can be tough.

It depends on the day. My coldest day on the water last winter coincided with a snow-storm. I got three hits all day. One was from a carp, one I missed, and the other was a twenty-one inch smallmouth. That smallmouth absolutely thumped the snot out of the Little Tube in thirty-four degree water. More frequently the take feels just like when you slowly pull your lure off the bottom along with a leaf or two. It's spongy, sort of a hovering feeling. Couple that sort of nebulous sensation with a kayak or canoe that is drifting ever so slightly and you can't tell if the mushy throb you just felt was your boat moving, or your personal best smallmouth deciding if he likes the brand of scent you applied to your finesse jig. This one is huge, so read it more than once. Get yourself stationary.

I am not a huge fan of anchors, as they can really put you in a dangerous situation on the river, but if that's the only way you can make yourself be completely stopped, do it. I much prefer to wedge my kayak on the bank, get out of the boat completely, run my YakAttack Park n Pole through a scupper hole (think parking brake for a kayak) or flop my leg over and have my heel dig into some shallow water. If you are drifting and casting, your ability to detect strikes is more than hampered. It's almost gone. Get yourself stationary.

When they do "hit" in a manner that you can detect it as more than just your jig sliding onto the next stone, it is a single crisp sensation. It's not always powerful, but it's always crisp: "Ting! Tick! Smack! Thwack!" in increasing power. In comparison, pulling your tube slowly over gravel creates a series of dull thud-like vibrations. Getting used to what the jig sitting on the bottom does feel like can be the best way to recognize when the fish has picked it up. The spongy loose line tension of a fish holding the bait in its mouth may be all you get. When it feels differently



than the solid connection you had with the bait a moment ago, it's time to set the hook.

Dialing up the sensitivity of your gear is also great advice. I use a 7'6" medium fast St. Croix LegendXtreme spinning rod for fishing finesse jigs, Little Tubes and hair jigs in winter. I started out winter fishing with a forty-five dollar house brand rod. I catch a lot more winter fish now. Sure, much of that is an experienced hand at work, but the hit recognition learning curve became much steeper once I invested in a top-end spinning rod. 15 lb test braid leading to a 10 lb test fluorocarbon leader helps too, due to minimal stretch transmitting every vibration down there.

Other Winter Baits

Bottom bouncing baits are the mainstay of winter fishing. A Confidence Baits Draggin' Head, with a Floating Bird (snag resistant jig coupled with small paddle tail grub) accounts for a lot of fish when they key on minnow forage. But during warming trends or rising water, you can catch them in the middle of the water column. A slow rolled spinnerbait with size five or larger single Colorado blade moves slow enough for activated smallmouth to chase and pounce.

I've caught them on a spinnerbait as cold as thirty-six degrees, so don't ever count it out! Only reel as fast as you need to in order to feel that the blade is rotating. Feeling the head bash into rocks on the bottom every few feet means that you are being patient enough with it.

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True five-pound river smallmouth are rare. I am blessed to live near a fishery that produces them. Most of the ones I've caught in recent years have been on a suspending jerkbait, namely a Lucky Craft Pointer 100. Two trips last February jump out in my mind as terrific winter suspending jerkbait days. The key to making them work is the pause. How long should you let it suspend? Forget that it's an artificial bait. Slather some scent on it, and pretend that you have a creek chub on a circle hook out there.

How Long Do I Let It Set?

I'm not going to tell you how long, but the five-pounders I've caught on jerkbaits in February have come on pauses measured in minutes, not seconds. Apply the same approach to bottom bouncing baits like tubes and hair jigs. I fish with plenty of people who move their baits faster, and catch more fish than I do, but my experience with the largest fish has been that they want to come across it, not be coaxed into believing that it's real with angler induced hops and jiggles. Need some convincing? Set a minnow trap during a warming trend. If you are lucky enough to catch a few craws or darters, you'll see how slowly they cover distance.

It's never too cold to fish a suspending jerkbait. You just need to pretend that it's live bait!

My favorite footage from the "River Smallmouth Winter Patterns" DVD I am currently editing is of a crawfish that I scooped out of thirty-seven degree water. He didn't hibernate. He was found in leaf matter, moving very slowly, possibly searching for aquatic insects to munch on. The footage shows my Confidence Baits Finesse Jig N Craw next to this crawfish. I needed about thirty seconds of footage to show that he wasn't dead, just moving very, very slowly. It drives the point home. Let it set for minutes, drag it slowly, three inches in thirty seconds, then let it set a few more minutes.

Winter Wear

I fish with lots of different people throughout the year. That list shrinks incredibly once it gets cold. Those who are willing to join me are going even if I am not. They all have one thing in common; proper winter wear. My buddy Juan Veruete put it best when he said, "It's not like fishing tackle. You can't scrimp to save a few bucks. You'll die. The stuff that can get you through a submersion dry is mandatory. Get the best stuff, or just don't winter fish."

Dry suits will certainly accomplish that submersion test, but they aren't the only option. My winter set up includes a Kokatat Whirlpool Bibs with relief

zipper, a wrist and neck gasketed spray top to match, and a host of other layers of fleece for my top, bottom, hands and head. The waterproof relief zipper is my favorite part of what I am wearing. I unzip down there, pee, and get right back to fishing. I have friends who go with the waders and spray top method. When they need to relieve themselves, they have to take off a PFD (my friend who drowned while winter-fishing took his off,) take off a spray top or rain jacket, and pull down the waders to pee. You lose a lot of heat when you do all of this. And ladies, they have relief zippers designed for you too! It's called a "drop seat" instead of "relief zipper".

Every item of clothing that is on me is duplicated in a dry bag. Also in my dry bag is a fire starting kit that can start a fire in a thirty-three degree downpour with a forty-mile-per-hour wind. You need to practice fire starting to figure out what works for you, but make sure that you have more than one ignition and initial fuel source. Steel wool, fire ribbon (think napalm in a toothpaste tube), waterproof matches, a Zip-po lighter, several disposable lighters and an old magazine should get you started.

The "Umbles"

Hypothermia is horrible. You can't hold a lighter in your hand long enough to get it lit (fumble). You can't communicate with your buddy to tell him you're messed up, you slur your words (mumble). You can't walk a straight line and are likely to fall down (stumble). You're more than irritable, and when your buddy tries to help you, you get nasty with him and shove him away (grumble). In other words, you resemble an angry drunk. You aren't likely to acknowledge these signs in yourself, so always fish with a buddy, have a pact that when either of you display these signs, it's time to be done with the trip.

Other random tips and tricks

Ice forming on your guides can be minimized by spraying down your line on the spool with WD-40 or Reel Magic. Buy multiple sets of fleece fingerless gloves. When one set gets wet, swap it out. Putting a hand warmer packet in the back of each glove helps keep your hands warm enough to feel the subtle tap of a smallmouth, which will definitely warm you up all over. Leave an itinerary with someone not going on the trip.

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When your feet get cold, do what skiers do. From a standing position, hold onto two stationary objects, trees in the absence of ski poles, and swing your legs hard. The blood rushes down into your toes. Carry a thermos of hot water. Coffee or tea make you pee all day long, but holding the thermos cup of hot water then drinking it really helps.

Finding Warmer Water

This is covered in greater detail in the DVD, but certain sections of rivers are likely to be warmer than others. It doesn't necessarily mean that fish move to these hot spots, but when one coincides with the type of winter pool structure outlined earlier, it's the kind of place you think twice about taking anyone else to. Warm water discharges from power plants are often well known. The better parts of these areas are not immediately below the discharge.

Find a good deep pool miles downstream, and you'll avoid the crowds. You will also be fishing for a population of bass that aren't killed by the thermal shock of a quick winter flood wiping out the band of warm water all at once. Truly "hot" winter water isn't good for the fishery, and in many parts of the country it's considered "thermal pollution" and is regulated against. Whether those regulations are enforced is another matter.

Tailrace fisheries support populations of trout in the summer by the cool middle layer of the reservoir coming through the turbines. Conversely in the early winter, the middle layer is warmer than the top layer, leading to say forty-three degree water when ambient river temperatures in the region are in the mid thirties. By mid-winter, the reservoirs chill down enough to not make this worthwhile, but in December and most of January, it's worth a look.

Spring influences were a focus for me early in my winter fishing. I found that the headwaters of rivers like the Shenandoah and James in Virginia had water temperatures in the low to mid forties when the lower sections cooled to the mid to upper thirties. The difference was an abundance of springs in the area. Look for regions that have caves or caverns as tourist attractions. The prevalence of karst geological activity coincides with many active springs and warmer

rivers. I know of one smallmouth inhabited tributary in particular that never freezes up, when five miles away the Potomac River is locked up in ice.

Three or More Day Warming Trend

Being a weather nut is a symptom of cabin fever.

It doesn't change if I am going fishing on Saturday or not, but looking at the highs and lows, the forecasted cloud cover, and prevailing wind seems to keep my cold winter evenings occupied. Doing so for years of winter fishing has taught me that periods of some of the best winter fishing has been either during a steady temperature trend or even better, one that is warming dramatically. The best of all situation features bright cloudless skies in the day followed by clouds moving in at night to retain the earth's sun gained warmth. It seems that each early January we have one of these four-day stretches; highs in the upper forties to mid fifties with lows that stay in the low forties at night. One day wont spur activity. Several days in a row almost always do.



Wrap Up

Winter river smallmouth fishing isn't something one usually aspires to. It comes naturally to those who obsess about river smallmouth the rest of the year, and can't really put it down once it's cold. The afflicted weep when the river finally locks up in ice, and are back on the river as soon as it opens up again. They are in grave danger of death from the pursuit. Those who commit to it know how to be as safe as possible. Presentations are slow, down-sized and deliberate, in locations that they have worked hard to find. The reward for enduring such harsh conditions? Photos of personal bests speak to that!

Jeff Little, co-owner of Confidence Baits, teaches river smallmouth and kayak fishing skills through his DVD series available at www.confidencebaits.net. Additional YouTube video how-to's can be found at the video link of www.kayakbassfishing.com.

Our Next Meeting:

**Tuesday
December 16th**

**Annual holiday party!
See page one.**

Upcoming Meetings:

Dec 16th	WSA - BFF holiday party	Feb 17th	WSA - Brad Simms, Smallmouth fishing in Southwest Wisconsin streams
Jan 20th	WSA - Ron Barefield, "Fishing the Mississippi River: Tips and Techniques that will help you catch fish"	March 16th	WSA - Mike Jacobs Note, this is a Monday!
Jan 26th	BFF- Randy Berndt - Fishing the Upper Peninsula		

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!**