



THE SMALLMOUTH HORIZON

Helping to Protect and Preserve Quality Smallmouth Bass Fishing

October 2008

Tackling River Smallmouth in the Fall

By Darl Black

I love fall on rivers. More precisely, I love the time during the fall when smallmouth are eating with mouths wide open. Hardcore river anglers refer to it as "magic time." It's the pay-off they have been waiting for all season long.

Anglers fish all summer on a river, catching lots of small bronzebacks but only the occasional decent-size smallmouth. Suddenly, as if by magic, bigger bass begin making an appearance once water temperature dips below 60 degrees. It is as if a spell had been cast that changes all those 12-inch smallies into 2-1/2 pounders! Furthermore, the number of bass caught on a good day shoots up. Not that it is daily occurrence, but in the fall I have enjoyed catching and releasing up to 50 smallies a day on a river!

Then later in the fall, yet another change. Once the water temperature drops into the high 40s, the number of bass caught on each trip begins a downward spiral but the average size of each fish caught continues to increase. The largest bass in the system



are generally taken when the water temperature hits the lower 40s and snowflakes are likely dancing across your face. Of course, it is possible for those big fish to go completely undetected if the angler is not fishing the right areas with the proper lure presentation. Here are key things you need to know in order to share the river action.

Fall Bass Are Minnow Eaters

During the summer, a river with good water quality is a smorgasbord for gamefish. Bass may choose to feast on a wide variety of prey including crustaceans, insects, amphibians, and of course many different species of baitfish. As

the river cools in the fall, nature begins to reduce the choices which bass are offered. It appears that bass instinctively alter their feeding behavior, targeting one or more species of baitfish exclusively.

Baitfish pursued by bass will vary depending on what indigenous minnows are available in the river system. Although the term "minnow" is used, bait may be a species of chub, shiner, or darter. And preferred size may be anywhere from three to six inches.

As an informal experiment, I fished locally trapped creek minnows and hellgrammites (a favorite

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summer food for smallmouth) side by side during the fall on a gravel bar. Minnows were hit repeatedly by bass, but hellgrammites were ignored.

I have numerous fishing acquaintances that insist on fishing a crayfish-colored crankbait in the fall on the river. I do not dispute the fact they catch bass with it. But I do dispute their contention that bass believe the crankbait to be a crayfish and therefore only a crayfish-colored crank will work.

Do bass mistake the perfect pattern crankbait to be a crawdad? I don't know. But the manner in which these anglers fish the crankbait – as a free-swimming lure rather than digging the bottom – would suggest to me that the bass mistake it for a minnow, or simply hit it because the crankbait appears to be “something” trying to get away. As far as the color, well, I catch a lot of smallies in the fall on a shad colored crankbait. A crayfish pattern – brown with accents of red or orange – may work best for some anglers because of a ‘personal faith factor’ or because color pattern is more visible under given water conditions.

When selecting artificial lures for autumn smallies, I go with ones that strongly imitate baitfish. Lure presentations that depict crippled preyfish are generally the best. This is especially critical when frenzied feeding periods are encountered. It is the old “match-the-hatch” adage.

What are some “baitfish-imitating” lures? Many items in the tackle box can imitate a baitfish – depending on how they are fished. Often, the critical factor is to keep the lure higher in the water column rather than smack on the bottom. Some of the lures include topwater, spinnerbait, jerkbait, crankbait, grub, and tube jig. More about choosing and using lures a little later.

Fall Is Transition Time For Bass

Throughout the summer, bass are spread out in a variety of river habitats. A substantial number of active fish feed in fast water areas because those are habitats for some of a smallmouth's favorite summer foods. Other bass will position themselves along quiet shorelines and in slower moving pools.

Just as fall is a transition time for bass in lakes, shifts in smallmouth location take place in rivers,

too. During initial cooling stages, river smallmouth continue relating to summer habitat. Actually, the number of bass feeding in shallow water increases because additional schools of baitfish move into these areas. The mouths of tributary streams, the head of riffles or hardpan rises coming out of deeper pools are likely to see frenzied feeding. Shallow flats with enough water depth to make scattered rocks barely visible may host rampaging school of smallies. On some rivers, submerged weedbeds attract minnows, which in turn attract smallmouth.

But eventually water temperature cools enough that baitfish will vacate the shallows. When the bait goes, so do the bass. It would be a mistake to identify a precise temperature because it is not an abrupt change. It generally happens gradually over a period of a couple weeks. Normally, I expect the shift to take place when water temperature is in the high 40s.

Now with baitfish headed to winter areas, the majority of smallmouth do likewise. Bass wintering holes, so to speak, will vary depending on the river habitat. The smallmouth's objective is to get out of the strongest current flow. In some large heavy-current rivers prone to high water and flooding, smallmouth have been documented moving into tributary creeks where they find more protected water. In extremely shallow, rocky rivers, smallmouth may not have the option of a deep pool, and satisfy their wintering needs in eddies only a few feet deep along irregular shorelines or downstream of an island.

In rivers with deep pools or holes, bass may not move to the deepest water. Instead they stake out a part of the pool where the bottom is littered with boulders and logs, or with small rock piles to help deflect the current. A depth of six to 12 feet for smallies is common in many rivers at this time of year. Even when fishing on river stretches where water may reach almost 30 feet deep in dredged sections, I rarely catch late fall/early winter smallies deeper than 18 feet.

By late fall, the baitfish bite has tapered off. Now it seems river bass are willing to accept any forage they can find, which includes scrounging the bottom for possible crustaceans. Once the water temperature

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Articles, photos, information, and calendar events for the newsletter are encouraged and should be submitted by the 1st day of the month of issue to: Dan Johnson, 426 Glenway St., Madison WI 53711. If possible, MSWord files sent to: johnson7@tds.net are most appreciated.

reaches the mid 40s, be sure to fish (1) deeper, (2) slower, and (3) nearer the bottom.

I like to explain lure presentation for rivers in this manner. Any lure can catch a bass or two on any given day. But there are lures that are more efficient at catching numbers of fish when bass are chasing and actively feeding. And there are lures that are more efficient at catching bass when the fish are in a non-aggressive mood.

Search Lures for Active Bass

First, let's address the lures to use for active, chasing bass in the fall.

Topwater: When bass are on the prowl in water temperatures above 55 degrees, perhaps even down to 50 degrees, a topwater lure which imitates a feeding or injured baitfish is tough to beat. The Rebel's Pop R or Storm's Chug Bug are two of my favorite chuggers that spit and gurgle with each snap of the rod. A cigar shaped splash-bait, such as the Super Spook, Jr., requires the angler to develop an alternating rod snap-slack line cadence to make it dog-walk on the surface.

Don't restrict use of topwater plugs to still water areas of rivers. Work them across shallow riffles, too. Even let the current carry one down a riff and work it slowly back upstream.

A buzzbait is another must have topwater. Rather than representing any forage in particular, a buzzer simply draws impulse strikes. Don't burn it across the water. Instead, work it just fast enough so the blade churns the surface. A ¼ or 3/8-ounce size is good for fall. If getting short strikes, try including a trailer hook. A buzzbait is perfect for extremely shallow water, such as casting parallel to the shoreline.

Spinnerbait: When conditions are right, nothing catches smallmouth like a spinnerbait. What are the conditions that favor spinnerbaits? Overcast skies and a bit of wind is one situation. Slightly off-color and slightly higher than normal water is another. Of course, if the river is running very high and discolored, a spinnerbait may be the most practical lure for smallmouth.

In clear water, willow-leaf blades give an advantage with high flash. But in dirty water, Colorado or Oklahoma (turtle) blades put out more thump. Size-wise, a compact ¼ or 3/8-oz. model is solid pick, and a thin wire frame is always a plus. Accent makes the River Special which incorporates the above features.

Try slow-rolling willow-leaves over shoreline flats, mid-river shoals and at heads of riffles. But when the water is high and off-color cast those thumper-blade spinnerbaits right towards the shoreline, targeting any possible object (log, rock) that breaks the current.

Crankbait: Lipped diving baits that run four to

six feet are standard picks for the typical river situation. There are many to choose from, including the Timber Tiger DC #5, Shad Rap #7, Reef Runner Scooter, and Bomber 5A. Also, to cover the 'ankle-deep' water, be sure to have something that runs in less than two feet of water. Along with the Mann's Minus One, there are new super shallow cranks including Timber Tiger CD #2, Shallow A, and Bandit Footloose.

Lipless rattling crankbaits are excellent for river smallmouth. Stick with the ¼-ounce size, choosing from the likes of a Rat-L-Trap, Rattling Rapala, or Super Spot.

Even though I'm not convinced a crayfish-colored crankbait translate as "crawdad" to a bass, I'll nonetheless have some brown and orange hard baits in the box along with shad or bone-colored ones. There will be at least one firetiger for those really dingy water situations.

Lures for Non-Aggressive Bass

There are other baits I depend on to trigger bites when bass are reluctant to chase suspected forage.

Soft Stickbaits: Also referred to as soft jerkbaits by some, this group includes Slug-Gos, Fin-S-Fish, Flukes, and a number of other fish-shaped baits. Rigged with a single offset hook and no external weight, the soft stickbait is a very, very slow sinker. It can be actively worked on the surface in a fashion similar to a Zara Spook, or it can be darted erratically several feet under the surface. But one of my favorite river techniques is to use it as a drift bait; in manner not unlike fishing live bait. Cast the soft stick out and let it drift with the current, applying an occasional rod twitch or snap. This can drive smallies crazy. I have more success with soft sticks fished in this manner through faster moving water than I do with a suspending hard jerkbait.

Suspending Jerkbaits: With water temperature hovering around 50 degrees, a suspending jerkbait is a good choice for bass in that in between mood – not quite active, not quite passive. The RipStick, Jr. from Reef Runner Tackle is an excellent example; it requires one or two Storm SusPend Dots to make it neutral buoyant. This bait is best when fished over medium-depth flats or on the edge of a structural break in moderately slow water where the bottom seems to disappear into the depths. Fish them with a rip-pause retrieve. Crank it down, and the pause. Snap the rod and then pause. Continue working it back to the boat with this routine, while trying pauses of varying duration.

Blade Bait: When bass move into wintering holes and lay close to the bottom, a compact blade bait is an excellent choice. Use as small a lure as the current

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will allow. Drop it straight down, and work it with a little rod tip lift. As soon as you feel the lure vibrate, lower it back down. A word of caution: in snag-infested river bottoms, this can be a lure-loosing proposition. Work it gingerly, setting the hook only when sure it is a fish.

Hair Jigs: "Flies" they used to call them on the TVA smallmouth reservoirs. Today, it is perhaps one of the most overlooked smallmouth river baits in a world gone soft plastic crazy. Natural hair has great flowing undulation in the water, making this type of jig wonderful for finessing reluctant fish. Swim a hair jig slowly along the bottom rather than bouncing or dragging it.

Curl-tail Grubs: If you are a plastic fanatic rather than a hair person, then fish an action tail grub. Not one with a small, rather stiff curl tail, but one with a big floppy curl tail. A five-inch Kalin Salty Grub has the right action slow swimming presentations.

Catch 'em Any Time Lure

There is one lure I always have one tied on a rod because it will catch both active and passive smallmouth at just about any water temperature.

Tube Lure: Want the near perfect soft plastic minnow and crayfish imitator rolled into one? Fish a tube jig. Choose from more color combinations than any other soft plastic lure. Use it in the summer, fall, winter and spring, simply varying the retrieve technique. Fish it as drop bait, drag it on the bottom, hop it, jump it, swim it, drift it or jerk it near the sur-

face. Tubes catch river smallmouth anytime.

In the early autumn, I prefer to use a lightweight jig head so the tube does not plummet to the bottom. Instead, cast across and slightly up current, and then follow the jig with the rod tip as it drifts downstream. This behavior is much like a baitfish.

In the late fall, with water temperature in the mid 40s, I fish a tube tight to the bottom using a heavier head. I keep the tube on a nearly vertical line almost under the boat. In this manner I can guide the tube jig over and through bottom obstacles that I can feel but not see.

Autumn on a northern river is the most scenic time of the year. But don't let the colors of autumn distract you from the fantastic smallmouth fishing. Then, if willing to hang in there through the extreme conditions of late fall, be prepared to catch and release the really big bass in the system

Darl Black is an outdoor writer, speaker and former guide based in Western Pennsylvania. We thank him for his permission to reprint this article. To see more of his writing you can visit his website:

smallmouthquest.com

SmallmouthQuest.com focuses on the where-to, when-to and how-to of bronzeback fishing, and is geared to helping anglers discover the country's best smallmouth fishing and assist them with tactics to catch (and release) more smallmouth.

WSA Financial Report

Opening Balance 1/1/08: \$5,552.64

Income:

Membership Dues	\$1,105.00
Bucket Raffles	\$87.68
Contributions/clothing	\$40.00
Auction Income	\$5,103.79
Total Income:	\$6,336.47

Expenses:

Newsletter	\$515.77
Speaker's Fees	\$45.95
Web Site Fees	\$223.00
Donations	\$2,063.26
Administrative exp.	\$57.25
Signs & Forms exp.	\$58.03
Total Expenses:	\$2,963.26

Ending Balance 9/15/09: \$8,925.85

Wisconsin Smallmouth Alliance donates to repair river landing

The club has donated \$400 to the DNR for improvements to the Pine Island landing on the Wisconsin River in Columbia County.

Our donation will be matched by the Badger Fly Fishers as well.

The money will be used to haul in rock to create a better launch site. In addition a structure will be placed that can display our "Free the Fighter" posters that promote catch and release of smallmouth bass, as well as other notices.

Our Next Meeting:

Tuesday
October 21st
Mapletree Restaurant
McFarland

Wisconsin River Smallmouth Populations

Tim Larson, a Wisconsin DNR fisheries biologist, will discuss the smallmouth fishery in the stretch of the river from the Dells dam to lake Wisconsin.

This water is already very popular with many of our club members, and you will want to find out why.

Tim can also fill us in on the plans for restocking Lake Delton.

Upcoming Events:

- Tuesday, October 21st 7:00 P.M.
Mapletree Restaurant, McFarland
WSA monthly meeting. DNR biologist Tim Larson on Wisconsin River smallmouth populations between the Dells and Sauk dams.
- Monday, October 27th 7:00 P.M.
Mapletree Restaurant, McFarland
BFF monthly meeting.
Program T.B.A.
- Tuesday, November 18th 7:00 P.M.
Mapletree Restaurant, McFarland
WSA monthly meeting.
Guide Ron Barefield on Lake Mendota and Wisconsin River smallmouth fishing.

WANTED



The club is now seeking volunteers to run for office in 2009. Elections will be held at our January meeting.

We need to have a president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer. The work is enjoyable and does not require very much of your time. It is, however, important. Won't you please consider filling one of these positions?

We will continue to grow and become a better club, but only with the active participation of each of our members. We need you to step up now.

Please contact one of the members listed at the bottom of page two. They can also give you a better idea of what we need you to do.

REWARD

The satisfaction that comes from working with fellow club members to build a better Smallmouth Alliance