



# THE SMALLMOUTH HORIZON

*Helping to Protect and Preserve Quality Smallmouth Bass Fishing*

October 2011

## Hair for Cold Water River Bronzebacks

By Blaine Mengel

**S**easoned largemouth bass anglers profess that for large bass throughout the seasons, a rubber or silicon-skirted jig with a pork or plastic trailer is hard to beat.

For that other black bass, however, hair is the way to go. Smallmouth bass inhabiting most rivers in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast prefer hair jigs to silicon or rubber skirted jigs, hands down.

It has been a popular myth over the years that smallmouth do not eat or that they lay dormant when the water temperature holds in the 30's, as it does during the cold water winter period. The cold water period is an excellent time for anglers to catch trophy river smallmouth bass, and a hair jig is frequently the most productive lure.

Rubber and silicon jigs produce their share of smallmouth and work nicely, especially when targeting thick cover. Hair jigs are subtle, yet they heighten curiosity in smallmouth that are not tempted by other productive lures, including rubber jigs. Hair jigs come in various sizes, colors and styles. Bucktails, deer hair and marabou style jigs are productive on many game fish, especially smallmouth bass.

Don's Handcrafted Jigs makes a jig called the Millennium Jig. This jig is constructed from rabbit hair and top quality jig heads and is the choice for trophy cold water river bronze. When dropped into the water, the rabbit hair pulsates giving the lure an



*Nice smallmouth caught on a hair jig.*

almost lifelike quality that will catch the attention of smallies even in water temperatures as cold as the mid 30's.

The key to fishing hair jigs effectively is the same as with any other lure - find the fish. A hair jig will produce as poorly as a rattling crankbait if fished in an area that isn't holding bass.

Target eddies and related current break lines, mid-depth rocky flats and rocky drop offs adjacent to wintering holes for the most aggressive smallies during the cold water period. Rocky drop offs near winter holding areas that receive direct sunlight warm first on sunny days or during a warming trend. Smallmouth gravitate to these areas searching for a quick, big meal.

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Remember, they aren't inclined to expend much energy in cold water. Transitional bottom areas, or areas where a soft, sandy bottom merges with rock or ledges, are excellent feeding areas for winter smallmouth. Remember to fish any concrete or wood cover within the targeted area for less active bass. Smallmouth hold in these areas from the late fall period right through the cold water period and into early spring on many rivers.

Cast a hair jig to drop offs and structure near these feeding areas. Lift the rod tip until it is as high as your forehead. This allows the jig to fall straight and keeps the line tight.

More aggressive bass may strike the jig while it is still falling immediately following the cast. Strikes can feel like mushy weight, similar to grass or a small stick. Or the strike may be a bit more evident, and a tick or tap will vibrate through the rod.

Quality graphite rods like Quarrow's ML3 and ML4 series rods are important for this application. Set the hook hard if either of these conditions occur. Many anglers use the "I'm not sure if it's a fish" theory if the bite isn't obvious. That theory is good for losing trophy smallmouth, so we'll stay away from it. We teach the "When in doubt, set the hook!" theory.

To work the jig, keep the rod tip high and the line tight and move the jig across the river floor or structure in a slow, deliberate manner. The jig shouldn't move more than several inches to a foot at a time. There is a time when swimming hair jigs is effective, when fish are chasing lures. That usually occurs when water temperatures are in the forties.

For cold smallies, slow and deliberate dragging, hopping or jigging is best. And when fish are extremely sluggish, as is the case much of the winter, the jig is effective when motionless on the river bottom. Remember, rabbit hair jigs create their own life.

Effective colors are black, olive and brown, although gray, tan and white will entice bass as well. Many jigs have combinations of several of the above colors. Jigs can be tipped with plastic or small pork trailers for more profile. Match the jig color with the trailer color for best results. Jigs can be thrown on medium action rods equipped with 6-10 pound McCoy Mean Green line.

River smallmouth bass provide tremendous fishing opportunities for beginning and advanced anglers twelve months

per year. Hair jigs, especially Millennium Jigs from Don's Handcrafted Jigs, are excellent lures for fooling river smallmouth bass even when they reach their most inactive period during the winter.

Find the fish holding areas and choose the best equipment for the job at hand. Remember to fish slowly and do not overwork the jig. The result of using hair jigs and following these simple rules can be quite satisfying.

*Blaine is a freelance writer and owner of [The Backwoods Angler](#), a smallmouth bass guide service on the Delaware, Susquehanna and Schuylkill Rivers of PA. Sponsors include Quarrow Rods, Don's handcrafted Jigs, Mizmo Bait Co., Odyssey Custom Jet Boats, Case Plastics and McCoy Line.*



*The Millennium jig from Don's Handcrafted Jigs.*

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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 to: Dan Johnson, 426 Glenway St. Madison, WI 53711. Word files sent to: [johnson7@tds.net](mailto:johnson7@tds.net) are most appreciated.

# Winter Is Coming: What's A Fish to Do?

by Joe Hennessy

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources  
Reprinted from [Lake Tides](#), Fall 2005

Have you ever wondered what life is like for the fish in our lakes when ice covers the surface and cold sets in? Ice anglers bring some of them up to the surface, but others remain in the darkness below.

As temperatures drop and ice encroaches from the shorelines of lakes and rivers, fish have fewer options for retreat than other creatures. Fish are *poikilotherms*, that is, "cold-blooded," meaning their body temperature remains close to that of the surrounding environment. They do not (in general) possess a mechanism for regulating their body temperature like mammals. Body heat is lost directly to the surrounding environment as they respire. So, as water temperatures approach 38½ F and colder, what's a fish to do?

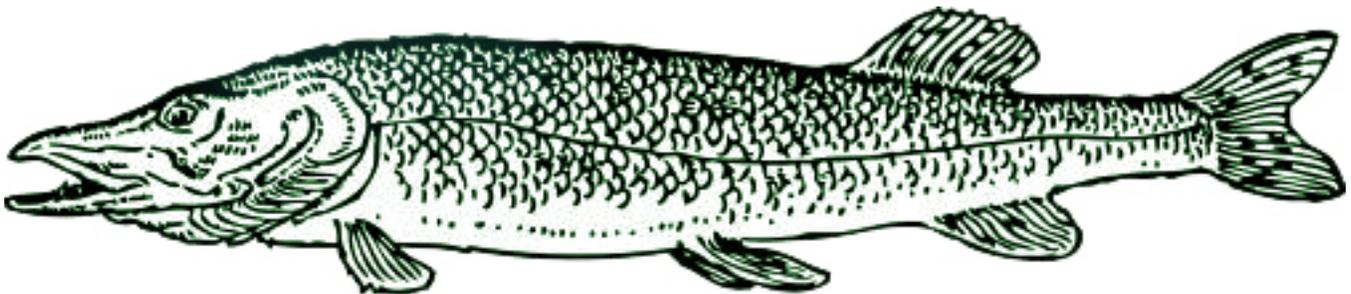
In the cold, fish move very slowly and metabolic processes take place slowly. When weather is warmer, they can move more quickly. In this way, fish do not have to spend much of their energy on keeping a constant temperature. Much of the food mammals eat is burned to maintain body heat (we and other mammals are *homiotherms*). There are tradeoffs in both lifestyles. A handful of fish species, such as some bullheads, partially burrow in mud to stay a little warmer. Other fish, such as bass, become very inactive and live off bodily energy stores developed in summer and fall. Still others, such as pike, are better adapted to cooler water and remain relatively active during winter, taking advantage of dead or slow-moving prey. These species are also more likely to spawn earlier in the spring.

All fish will continue to feed through winter, but at a relatively slow rate, because they are not using much energy to move or maintain body temperature. Fish of all species tend to congregate in areas where food is relatively easily obtained, and where shelter is nearby. For bluegill or perch, food is frequently small, worm-like midge larvae (chironomids), which can be found on muddy lake bottoms. For pike, food is where the bluegill and perch are!

Rivers present additional challenges for wintering fish. Food is less readily available and cold water temperatures make fish less active, but currents do not relent. Slow-water habitat becomes crucial for many species, and others seek the deepest holes they can find. In large rivers such as the Mississippi, channelization for barge traffic and levee construction in the name of flood control has eliminated or isolated a great deal of side-channel or backwater habitat. Side channels and backwaters are slow-water areas on the margins of the main river channel that traditionally provided refuge for many fish in winter. These areas offered greater abundance of food and slow or still water. Today in many parts of large rivers this type of habitat is unavailable, and fish are forced into less desirable alternatives.

For example, in the Mississippi River, the areas just downstream of and just behind wing-dams provide key areas with deep water and little current. However, these areas are much more exposed to the main channel than traditional backwater sloughs, and do not provide the same diversity and amount of habitat once available. Pressure waves from barges passing in winter are of sufficient force to physically move fish out of their refuges and send them into the main channel, where they are forced to use precious energy to get back to safe haven. Another regularly observed phenomenon in large rivers is "winter drift" of catfish, where catfish of all sizes are seen alive near the surface, but passively drifting downstream. The ultimate fate of these fish is unknown.

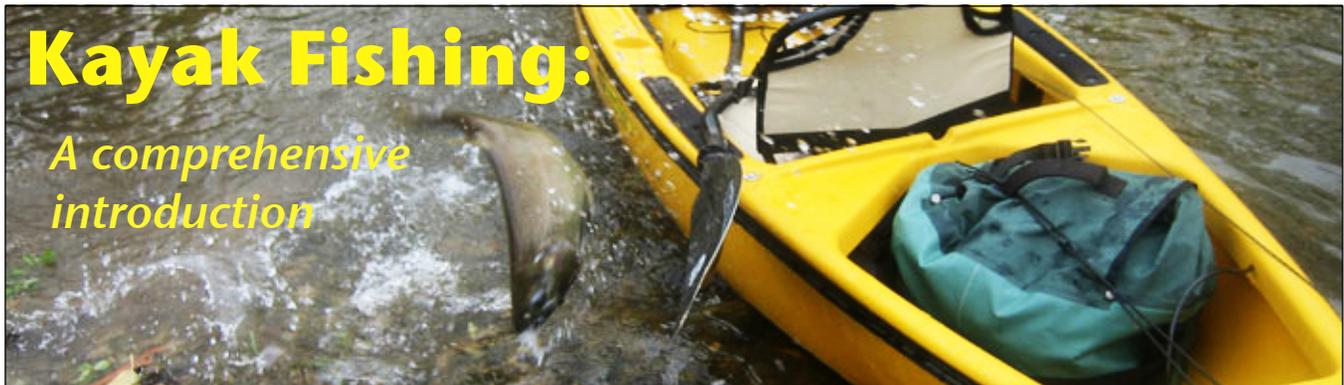
Whether home is a lake or a river, a fish faces survival challenges throughout the long winter. A chilling thought, indeed.



# Our Next Meeting:

Tuesday  
October 18<sup>th</sup>

## Scott Hamstra



### Kayak Fishing:

*A comprehensive  
introduction*

If you've ever considered fishing from a kayak, you're sure to enjoy this presentation.

Scott, a self-described, "man of reason" is the sales floor manager at Rutabaga. He will cover local kayak fishing opportunities, gear, boat selection, and techniques for making your next trip more enjoyable and more successful.

A native of Middleton Wisconsin, Scott's interests include kayaking, canoeing, fly and spin fishing salt and freshwater, camping, hunting grouse, pheasants, and ducks; and anything else that keeps him off the couch and away from the television (except on Monday nights.)

He has fished and paddled in both northern and southern Wisconsin.

# Upcoming Events:

**Tuesday, October 18<sup>th</sup> 7:00 p.m.**  
Mapletree Restaurant, McFarland

**WSA Monthly Meeting**

**Monday, October 24<sup>th</sup> 7:00 p.m.**  
Mapletree Restaurant, McFarland

**BFF Monthly Meeting**

George Douglas, Kype Fishing Magazine  
"Fish like a Guide"

**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.**