



THE SMALLMOUTH HORIZON

Helping to Protect and Preserve Quality Smallmouth Bass Fishing

November 2011

Winter Smallmouth Bass on Float and Fly - Creek Style

By Matt Doddridge

The sun glistens off the snow as songbirds chirp quietly. The wind howls through the now bare trees, forcing them to surrender the last of their leaves. These and many other scenes symbolize that old man winter has arrived once again. Most people associate this time of year with hunting, whittling down the honey-do list, or cooking up a big pot of chili while watching some football or basketball on the tube.

Many fishermen have long since stowed away their fishing gear and will eagerly wait for spring to break it out again. Those that engage in this practice overlook a prime opportunity to catch some nice fish – in particular some nice smallmouth bass. Winter angling provides a unique atmosphere much different than other seasons. No annoying pesky insects, no poison ivy to contract, and most importantly – no company on the water. November through February stands out as my favorite time of the year to fish, and one of the main techniques in my arsenal is the float'n'fly.

I live in an area with many small streams and few large bodies of water; hence the majority of my winter fishing consists of wading creeks that drain less than 100 square miles.

Before I get too much farther into the nuts and bolts of the float'n'fly technique, I should briefly review some winter wading safety tips. First and foremost – know your water. Do your homework in the summertime. Sub 40 degree weather is not the time



The author with another nice creek fish.

to start intimately exploring new water. In addition, do not take your favorite water for granted. A stream's course can change drastically from year to year due to erosion or excessive flooding. Holes once ankle deep may now be head-high or deeper. A good pair of polarized sunglasses can help you visualize the bottom contour.

Second, make sure to dress for the occasion. Wear layers and utilize garments that wick away moisture. My winter wardrobe consists of the following: a base layer of under armor or equivalent, a mid-layer of fleece, an outer layer of flannel pants on bottom, and a heavy jacket on top. I usually will wear two pair of thick socks with foot warmers between the layers. A pair of good gloves, a balaclava/ski-mask, breathable waders, and some wading boots round out the ensemble. Remember it's always better to be too warm than too cold in the dead of winter.

Now that the common sense coordinator has spoken, let's discuss the necessary components of the float'n'fly rig. In my opinion, the most important

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component of the rig is the rod. I prefer a light action spinning rod in the 7 to 8 foot range. Two reasons for the added length on the rod: first, the extra length will allow you to use a longer leader (defined as the length of line between the bobber and jig) when fishing deeper holes.

Second, a longer rod will help do some of the work for you when dealing with light line. As an added bonus, a light action rod will keep you guessing as to how big the fish is!

The reel serves as another vital component of the rig. I use a 2000 series spinning reel with a 5:1 gear ratio. Some might prefer a higher gear ratio to catch up with a renegade fish that charges straight towards them. Regardless of the reel brand selected, a good drag and an easily accessible anti-reverse switch can help with fighting bigger fish.

The other three components to the “stream” version of the float’n’fly rig are the bobber, the line, and the jig. For line, I recommend a line size in the 4 to 8 pound test range. Monofilament, fluorocarbon or pure fluorocarbon will all three suffice. I’ll leave it to you the reader to decide on which brand to use. I like P-line CX premium and generic Excel from Bass Pro Shops.

For the bobber, a weighted Styrofoam 1 inch round bobber works well. This size casts plenty far enough and can be seen from a good distance. Some use a slip bobber, but in my opinion a fixed bobber

presents the jig in a more natural fashion (more on that later).

The last component of the rig is of course the jig. I like to use a 1/16th ounce hair or duck feather jig. Craft hair has some of the most life-like action – it undulates ever so slightly in the water. As far as colors, I tend to go with natural hues such as gray, blue, and white. For contrast, pink and chartreuse work well.

The possibilities are endless but keep in mind that just about any reasonable color combination will

work. Same goes for jig heads – I prefer round ball heads but have plenty of minnow-head jigs in the arsenal as well. I like to keep the size relatively small because the size of baitfish in the winter months tends to run on the smaller to medium side.

Now that the components of the rig have been discussed in depth let’s look at the actual rigging and presentation. To rig, simply tie on your jig and clip your

bobber at a depth that keeps the jig just off the bottom. When attaching the bobber, I usually wrap the line around the bottom clip twice. This keeps the bobber in place but it also allows you to easily slide the bobber up or down.

When going with the fixed bobber make sure to check the line for weak spots, especially when experimenting with different leader depths. Some use a 3-way swivel which will help prevent potential line fray but the trade-off lies in the fact that you have to



A selection of float’n’fly jigs and bobbers.

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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 are most appreciated.

re-tie completely to change depth. I go with the fixed bobber because the creek depths change frequently and it is just easier to slide the bobber up and down. Lakes and large rivers are a whole different animal and I actually prefer a 3-way swivel when fishing the float'n'fly on the big water.

An important key to having success with the float'n'fly (or any winter presentation) is throwing it in the right places. Once we better understand this concept we can talk presentation. A smallmouth's metabolism slows way down in the colder water. Ample cover and easy meals must be available for a smallie to take up residence in a given habitat. These requirements usually coincide with the deepest water in the creek.

Start your search by looking for bends or narrow runs that dump into a wide pool – in these areas and others the current will bring the food to deeper water where smallmouth will patiently wait. On smaller creeks I usually look for holes with that blue-ish tint to them; normally the bottom is not readily visible. A general rule of thumb I go by: places that held good fish in the warmer months also hold good fish in the winter time. This may or may not be the case on larger rivers and lakes. In my experience I have found that the bigger fish don't migrate far for winter in the small streams of Southern Indiana.

We've found the holes and we have the gear but we still have to determine the specific areas within these holes to target our offerings. Within any given area smallies can be holding on ledges, in wood, on rock piles or humps, on current seams, at the front of the pool, at the back of the pool, or they could just be aimlessly wandering. I've even caught them right in the current. The possibilities are numerous and usually patterns are initially discovered by trial and error.

Now the time has finally come to 'show me' the jig. If you've made it to this point in the quest rest assured you've done the hardest work already! The presentation is simple really - just cast to likely targets, let the jig settle, and begin shaking your rod. Reel in the slack, and repeat. Remember earlier when we discussed revisiting the slip versus fixed bobber? Here's why the fixed bobber excels: it keeps the jig in the same spot in the water column (ideally a couple of inches off the bottom).

When you shake the rod the jig quivers in place, representing a dying baitfish and more importantly an easy meal. The fish slurps down the jig and the bobber goes under. If you try to use a slip bobber, the fly will move up and down throughout the water col-

umn as you shake the jig and reel in. This results in potentially less time in the strike zone. Also, the weight of the jig might not be enough to pull the line through the bobber.

For the hook set you don't have to "cross their eyes" so to speak. A simple upward sweep of the rod will suffice – 90% of the time this will result in the fish being hooked securely in the top of the mouth. There are various cadences that can be employed to impart action on the jig. Sometimes the fish want violent shaking, other times you can let the chop on the water do the work for you. Other times you can do nothing and still get bites. Let the fish tell you what they want.

The float'n'fly can be a viable option for coaxing lethargic winter smallmouth into biting. Keep in mind that my way isn't necessarily the only way – remember the old adage "there's more than one way to skin a cat". It is a good idea to tote along an additional rod for jigs and/or soft plastics, especially if low and clear water conditions exist or you want to pick apart a specific logjam. A jig or soft plastic can result in less numbers but bigger fish on average.

Don't hesitate to use the float'n'fly in the warmer months too – I will often downsize both the jig and the bobber to catch slab-sized rock bass and sunfish in the summertime. Crappie like those jigs as well – in fact the technique initially targeted crappie. However, Tennessee crappie anglers began complaining about constantly catching smallmouth by mistake!

Consider the float'n'fly a tool to utilize to help extend the fishing season into a year-round event. Be safe out there and remember to respect the resource – release your catch for another angler to enjoy.

Matt Doddridge is a member of the [Indiana Smallmouth Alliance](#) and this article was first published on their website.



Our Next Meeting:

Steve Mortenson Trophy Winnebago Smallmouth



Tuesday November 15th

Lake Winnebago is soon to be one of the **top** smallmouth bass fisheries in the state. Steve Mortenson, the host of *Anglin' Adventures* TV series and Instructional Fishing Videos, will explain why this is happening and how to take advantage of this great smallmouth bass fishery.

He will give an in-depth look on how to fish this big body of water and discuss the best lure choice's, color selection, seasonal patterns, locations and structure, as well as proper equipment. As a bonus,



Steve has some amazing underwater footage of the smallmouth bass.

Steve specializes in fishing for big largemouth and smallmouth bass.

With his knowledge of techniques, locations, and presentations, his seminars are very educational - cutting edge as well as fun.

A full-time fishing guide, Steve is fast talking, intense, and very entertaining.

Upcoming Events:

Tuesday, November 15th 7:00 p.m.
Mapletree Restaurant, McFarland

WSA Monthly Meeting

Monday, November 28th 7:00 p.m.
Mapletree Restaurant, McFarland

BFF Monthly Meeting

Dave Ruetz-Flyfishing the four seasons in Wisconsin

Monday, December 12th
Mapletree Restaurant, McFarland

WSA/BFF Holiday Party

Walt's African Odyssey

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!