



THE SMALLMOUTH HORIZON

Helping to Protect and Preserve Quality Smallmouth Bass Fishing

November 2014

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

By Jeff Little

Each spring, I get a chuckle out of comments from people who know me only casually. "It's almost fishing season, are you getting excited?" inquires a coworker. "Yep, I'm ready!" I reply without further explanation. I'm ready when the first red maple buds drop, and I'm ready at 4:30 a.m. on an early February Saturday morning when the forecast features freezing rain.

Winter river smallmouth fishing is not a hobby, it's an affliction. I know of two fellow anglers who have died doing it, skunkings are routine, ice destroys your gear, and it often angers my wife when I go in bad weather. Despite all of this, it's my favorite time to get after the smallmouth. Some day brain research will study the afflicted and find that anglers aren't much different than those suffering from gambling addiction. They will see certain areas of our brain scans light up, watch serotonin or dopamine levels spike in the same way and understand what some of us have for years. It's Saturday morning and we NEED to go fishing.

Some research done on gambling focuses on powerful brain activity following a win or reward when it's not expected. Certainly the expectation to catch a fish after seven fruitless and cold hours on the water is low. But it does work. When it does, when you finally feel that signature THUMP! and swing on it, twenty-nine degrees quickly climbs to fifty-nine degrees. Your toes are no longer numb and you are ready for another seven hours. The high of catching smallmouth in those conditions is somehow higher.



I've watched many novice smallmouth anglers set their sights on winter fishing. With determination they have become more successful anglers, not only during the cold months, but year-round as a result of the winter fishing experience. Here's a primer for how to do it safer and more effectively.

Congregation

As I am writing this article my local water temperatures swing between the upper fifties and lower sixties. The trees are almost at peak foliage and an aggressive suspending jerkbait bite is just around the corner. It's late October. This is when I scout for new winter habitat. The float I completed last Friday with my kids featured several stretches of low catch rates with two distinctive series of pools where we caught most of our fish. I took notice and made mental notes of landmarks to find them.

In the upcoming month and a half, I will replicate the float several times. The early November floats will feature a quick float down to each of these pools followed by hours of thoroughly dissecting each one. I tend to fish and float down left bank, paddle back up to the top, then float down the right side, and finally the middle. I am looking for macro features of the

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Share your thoughts on Wisconsin's fish and wildlife, their habitats, and outdoor recreation

From the Wisconsin DNR

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is currently revising two key conservation plans - the [Wildlife Action Plan](#) and [Fish, Wildlife, and Habitat Management Plan \[PDF\]](#). Through completion of an online questionnaire, the public can give the department valuable input regarding Wisconsin's fish and wildlife resources management.

"We take great pride in our efforts to involve the public in our conservation efforts," said DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp. "These two plans are the driving force behind much of the department's federal funding, and will help Wisconsin continue to provide for such a wide range of outdoor activities."

The Wildlife Action Plan and Fish, Wildlife, and Habitat Management Plan act as a blueprint for how the department will manage and protect Wisconsin's fish and wildlife resources over the next ten years.

The department must complete each plan in order to receive federal funding that will help support healthy, sustainable fish and wildlife populations and their habitats. Funding is also key for the creation and maintenance of outdoor recreation opportunities throughout the state.

Public involvement is a key piece of the puzzle in ensuring the state remains a leader in resource management and protection.

An online survey is one component of a comprehensive public outreach effort associated with updating the Wildlife Action Plan and Fish, Wildlife, and Habitat Management Plan. The survey will close Nov. 14 at midnight.

To complete the survey, click here or enter this address into your search bar: <http://22.selectsurvey.net/DNR/TakeSurvey.aspx?SurveyID=88KK8p-m2>.

Translated versions will be made available in both Hmong and Spanish within the next few weeks.

To learn more about the Wildlife Action Plan and the Fish, Wildlife, and Habitat Management Plan, visit dnr.wi.gov and search keyword "[wap10year](#)."

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: Tara Bergeson, DNR conservation biologist, 608-264-6043



The Upper Sugar River Association has a nifty paddlers' map on their website. Check it out here:

<http://usrwa.org/wp-content/uploads/USRWApaddlingmap.pdf>

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pool's structure that provide a slowing of current at all river levels. The last four words of the previous sentence can't be emphasized enough. More on that later.

By the time I complete the inaugural "Black Friday Float" the end of November, I'll have a good idea of the specific areas of the pools they will be tightening into. In winter fishing, once you find one, you've likely found a mess of them. This congregation starts in fall, but as December approaches, the group tightens. Float trips from here until late March mean making a beeline to these pools. No casts are made until you arrive on the scene.

Spot within the spot

When my alarm clock jolts me awake on cold January mornings to get up and go fishing, I am usually dreaming that I am already there. Visualizations help spur success. One specific spot that recurs in my winter fishing dreams is on the Rapahannock River, a smaller remote flow in central Virginia. The pool has great macro current deflectors - ledges that swing a wide and deep flow away from one bank. It ends in a rock garden that provides a great place for them to move a short distance and spawn in May. But the spot I dream of placing my hair jig is a mound of gravel deposited by a notch in a steep bank. The water is deep all around it, but the top of the mound is only two feet deep. The late day sun beats on it, spiking the water temperature in that tiny area.

I can't tell you what to go out and look for in terms of the spot within the pool that makes it happen. It's different in every winter pool. Sometimes it's a big log that has become incorporated into the steep clay bank. Sometimes it's an inside bend with three trash can sized boulders just upstream of the deepest water in the pool. If you have put in your time in October and November, you are on a good winter pool. Take December and pound that pool until it gives up the spots within the spot.

Winter's kitchen table

Where you find them at the end of three or four unusually warm winter days will be completely different from where they hunker down as ice forms on the

surface. The days when I come home with an SD card full of photos of four-pounders are usually the former. That's when they come shallow right next to deep water. Shallow water without current or wind pushing on it will warm up faster than deep water. Add in six hours of bright sun, and the water temperature really spikes. Stoneflies emerge, darters that had been buried and motionless in the leaf matter start to venture out. The bass know that they can and must take advantage of the brief meal opportunity. Don't bother with shallows that are more than seventy-five yards away from the most current-protected and deep part of the pool. Find the largest deep from one bank to the other section of the pool, look for any shallow sun bathed area right next to it and work it hard.



Survive the ice-out flood

Years ago a friend took me on a very eye opening ride on his jet boat. It was early March and the Susquehanna had just fallen below flood stage. Not only was the water the color of chocolate milk, but full sized tree trunks were drifting downstream at us. We hit three spots and pounded fish at each one. I would drop the tube down into the narrow bank of calm water inches from shore and feel the line slide across the backs of fish. The trolling motor battery didn't last long

that day. We eventually used an anchor, but had to keep an eye upstream for those tree trunks coming at us. Almost all of the water in the river was in motion. Plate ice collided with bridge pilings and parts of people's riverside shacks floated by at a pace that had me questioning my sanity for being out there. I didn't question my friend's sanity though, he was nuts for sure.

Crazy or not, my friend gave me one of the most important nuggets of knowledge on winter river smallmouth fishing: They choose places where they won't get washed away regardless of river level. One spot featured a creek mouth where water backed up in a calm notch. Another was the tail end of an island. A four-foot wide patch of foam that sat

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completely still right there was the widest pad of still water we found that day. Another was along a bank that showed no reason for the slowed current. It had no point that diverted current away from it, but slack water was there, and so were the fish.

Going back to each of these places at normal and even low flow showed similar areas of sitting foam, but they had grown considerably in size. Lots of places afford them the ability to stay in place at low flow. Not all of them are good. Their metabolism slows to a pace where they seem to almost sleep walk.

A friend described floating over a slumbering smallmouth on the upper Juniata in Pennsylvania. He spotted its tail sticking out from under a log. He stopped his kayak directly over it and watched it for minutes, then actually nudged it with his kayak paddle. He expected it to shoot off, but instead watched a very reluctant and slow swim away. They can't react quickly or swim very far when the river comes up fast, as is the case in ice out late winter floods. Pools that allow them to move short distances to areas of no current during a winter flood allow them to survive.

I wish I could tell you reliably what that looks like. I can't, but I'll provide some features that many of these pools and spots have in common. Steep banks are a huge plus. As the bank contour comes down steep, it usually continues in that direction, leading to deep water right next to the bank. The high bank affords them the short commute to get the heck out of the way of the river when it floods.

Another huge plus is depth. It's not the kind of depth where you see a ledge that comes up to the surface then plunges to twelve feet deep that I'm talking about. There is no magic number of feet a pool must be to hold them in winter. But pools that have bank-to-bank depth, relative to the size of the river, hold a lot of volume.

Stream flow is measured in cubic feet per second. Think of slicing a river in a cross section. Do that in a riffle, and there's a fairly thin area where cur-

rent passes through quickly. Do that in the deepest pool, and the cross section is huge. The flow is slow, almost stopped. Each area has the same cubic feet per second, but the second one with a cross section more like a lake than a stream is the preferred winter habitat.

Downsize Your Presentation

Imagine the frustration of fishing for eight hours without a bite then having that one hit, swinging on it and missing. Then imagine the frustration of reeling the tube that was hit only to find that all the tentacles

were ripped off on the hook set.

The fish chomped down on it a quarter inch shy of getting the hook inside it's mouth! That situation plays out more than most anglers realize. That frustration gave birth to my favorite winter lure: The Little Tube. At two inches long, many mistake the chubby little tube for a crappie lure. I'm not sure if their jaws are just too frozen shut to fit a larger bait inside, or if they have a preference for smaller forage in winter, but it will get you more bites in a day. When they do take it, they have to take the whole thing. I sell them at my website confidencebaits.net, along with the proper thin wire jig heads to match in 3/32nd and 1/8 oz. A color called Dark Chocolate is my favorite in winter. The same "smaller profile" approach applies to hair jigs. Tie them sparse, and they draw more strikes. My favorite hair jig is one

you can find a how-to tie video on YouTube. Search "strap jig" and you'll find it. It utilizes a unique rigging of a #4 octopus hook, something that transcends the anglers need to feel the bite. It caught my coldest smallmouth at just over thirty-two degrees and I never felt the bite. I didn't need to; the fish hooked themselves when they slowly swam off.

To be continued next month

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.



A Confidence Baits Finesse Jig N Craw is an ideal compact profile for tight lipped cold water smallmouth.

Our Next Meeting:

**Tuesday
November 18th**

Dan Boggs and Abe Downs from Blackwater Flyfishing "A Day on the Wisconsin River: Tips and Techniques for Mastering Dark Water Fish"

Learn from Dan and Abe what it takes to put Smallmouth Bass and Musky in the boat from the dark waters of the Wisconsin River in the central part of the state.



Upcoming Meetings:

Nov 18th	WSA - Dan Boggs and Abe Downs of Blackwater Flyfishing	Jan 20th	WSA - Brad Simms - Smallmouth fishing in Southwest Wisconsin streams
Nov 24th	BFF - Matt Wagner – The Elk River in British Columbia	Feb 17th	WSA - Ron Barefield
Dec 16th	WSA - BFF holiday party	March 16th	WSA - Mike Jacobs Note, this is a Monday!

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!**