



Cold Water Crankbaits



Spending most of my time on the water in pursuit of big smallmouth bass, I have caught smallmouth on just about every type of lure ever concocted. On occasion, a guiding client will pick a lure out of a tackle box that has the wrong action, wrong color and which runs at the wrong depth, but somehow they connect with a misguided smallmouth. However, these situations are the exception rather than the rule. Most seasoned anglers catch fish because they use the right presentation, fish in the right place and don't rely on luck.

While I do rely heavily on soft plastics, I can often fall into a rut spending most of the day hung up on them. While I may be catching fish, I may not be getting to the mother load. On many occasions, crankbaits do not produce the *most* bass in a day but they often catch the *big* fish of the day. Over the years I have caught 20 inch plus smallmouth on crankbaits, May through November. However, many anglers just grab a crankbait out of the box and start casting without observing the weather conditions, water temperature or depth of water they are fishing. Failure to do so will usually result in a poor success rate. The bass angler that knows how, when and where to use a hard bait will consistently put smallmouth in the boat; and there are no better conditions to use a hard bait than in cold water.

Pre-spawn smallmouth are as unpredictable as the spring weather. One day you can find them on a point, and the next day the same fish can be cruising the flats. When searching for cold water scattered smallmouth, I rely almost 100 percent on crankbaits and suspending jerkbaits. The crankbait will allow you to cover the entire water column effectively and the suspended jerkbait allows you to refine your presentation.

A case in point was one day last May. It was a typical pre-spawn situation; we were fishing after a cold front, the wind was out of the northwest 20 miles per hour and the water temp went from 60 degrees down to 57 degrees. Not conditions to write home

about, but a guide has to do what he has to do.

Our first stop was a rock point on the edge of a shallow bay where we had caught several smallmouth between 18 and 20 inches and one huge 22 inch-er the previous day. After covering every inch of the point and surrounding water with crankbaits and plastics, we finally connected with one 21 inch smallmouth on a suspended jerkbait over eight feet of water. I told my client that even though he had caught that giant smallmouth we'd best keep on the move since it was probably the only active fish in the area.

We already established that smallmouth were scattered and we would be seeing lots of scenery. I headed up - river to a few of my honey holes with the next stop being a shallow rocky gravel shoreline that had held a load of fish the day before. Instead of moving into the shallows, I knew the smallmouth would be scattered along the first breakline. I gave my client a Yo-zuri Hardcore Shad (SH-60) in Silver Minnow and I tied on a Yo-Zuri Suspending Edge Minnow in Blood Flash.

I instructed my client to cast the crankbait both along the breakline and the current break. He made a good cast and immediately connected with an 18 inch smallmouth. As we drifted along the breakline making good casts I noticed that the water temperature was continuing to drop. On my next cast I let my Edge Minnow suspend motionlessly for as long as my nerves would allow. I tightened up my line and, suddenly, what had seemed like a snag ended up being a 20 inch smallmouth. Since my client had not caught another fish with the crankbait he also tied on an Edge Minnow in Blood Flash.

We continued to catch big smallmouth the rest of the day on the Edge Minnow, and the longer we let the bait suspend the more and bigger smallmouth we caught. Granted, with a 20 mile per hour northwest wind it required maximum concentration, but we caught big fish. Remember that after a cold front and dropping water temperatures in the spring, no matter how slowly you retrieve a crankbait it is still too fast. However, a big smallmouth cannot resist a suspending jerkbait.

The next day we fished the same breakline and a few similar areas, and we again pounded the big smallmouth. The weather had improved and the water temperature continued to rise. We caught about the same number of fish on both the Hardcore Shad and the Edge Minnow but we had to refine our presentations. My client retrieved the crankbait with a faster steady retrieve and I used a shorter more direct pause on the suspending jerkbait. Same bait, but we caught more fish with a different presentation. It is amazing how a few degrees of change in water temperature can require the need to refine your presentation. Many anglers would have made the mistake of switching to different lures and probably come up short.

When using crankbaits and suspending jerkbaits your choice of tackle is critical and it is important to match your rod with the size of the bait you are using. For the baits we were using I prefer a Lamiglas XC 664 or a Lamiglas XC 703. These rods have the perfect combination of balance and sensitivity and will allow you to connect with more fish. Spool a high quality bait casting reel with Yo-Zuri Hybrid line. The Hybrid line is a fluorocarbon/nylon blend that has limited stretch, allowing a crankbait to run to its maximum depth.