

Smallmouth, Rocks & Crankbaits



It is no secret that smallmouth like rocks. However, just because you find rocks there is no guarantee that smallmouth are present. Many anglers make this assumption and pound the rocks and come up short. Over the years I have developed specific smallmouth patterns, and come to the conclusion that smallmouth will relate to different types of rock at different times of the year. The same shallow rocky shoreline that holds large numbers of smallmouth in June, might only hold juvenile smallmouth by mid-summer. Yes, rocks will hold smallmouth throughout the entire open water period, but the trick is knowing what rocks hold smallmouth.

Through all my years of guiding I have learned that the key to finding predator fish is tapping into the forage base. The best looking structure will be void of predator fish if there is no food present. On many lakes and reservoirs smallmouth will spawn on rock/rubble shorelines. After spawning is completed these same areas will hold huge numbers of crayfish. As long as the

rocks continue to hold crayfish, smallmouth remain in the area. However, if crayfish are absent from the area so will the smallmouth. When looking for smallmouth along rock shorelines my bait of choice is a crankbait. A crankbait allows you to cover water quickly and puts you on active smallmouth.

Crayfish imitation crankbaits are a good choice spring through early fall. Good crayfish imitation crankbaits should have a contrast in the baits color. Smallmouth will often hit the crankbait due to the contrast as opposed to the actual color. The colder the water the tighter the action on the crankbait should be. When the water is above 50 degrees, rattling crankbaits are very effective. In water colder than 50 degrees, rattling baits are still effective but smallmouth seem to be attracted to the action of the bait as opposed to the sound.

When the water temperature is below 40 degrees, regardless of the type of water being fished, I prefer wood minnow imitation crankbaits. Wood

crankbaits have a slower, tighter action which is more desirable in cold water. I have observed smallmouth following a plastic crankbait and refuse to hit it, only to have the same fish strike the wood crankbait. In clear water, top colors are black/silver, black/gold and blue/silver, while in stained water stick with perch, fire tiger, and chartreuse/white.

While any rock can hold smallmouth, if you are looking for big fish you will need to be selective, especially in cold water. Once the water temperature is in the mid-forties smallmouth will start cruising shallow rocky areas. On some lakes and reservoirs, rocks will retain heat and the water temperature can be 3 or 4 degrees warmer. Smaller smallmouth are the most mobile and will cruise the shallows and hit a crankbait aggressively.

Larger smallmouth will also cruise the shallows but tend to spend more time along the edges. These transition areas from hard to soft bottom can hold several large smallmouth. Once you locate a transition area with your electronics, try to cast along the transition. Use several different crankbaits which run various depths to work the transition effectively.

On reservoirs, look for larger smallmouth to also relate to transition areas, but any combination of wood and rock could be a sleeper area for a big fish. The closer the wood/rock is to deeper water the greater the odds are for a big smallmouth. Cast a crankbait tight to the wood and give it a fast twitch. A big fish will be holding tight in the deep edge of the wood and the ripping motion will trigger a big smallmouth. The big smallmouth will hit the crankbait within the first few feet of the retrieve.

These small rock/wood areas have salvaged many days for me over the years, and I must admit I discovered this pattern accidentally. One day in mid-May, I had been guiding for 3-4 hours and, had caught only a few small bass for my efforts. The fishing was so slow that I had considered taking the boat out of the water and moving to another reservoir. In a last ditch effort to catch fish we moved to a steep shoreline with scattered downed wood.

Moving slowly along the shoreline and casting perch and minnow imitation crankbaits we did not connect with a fish until we found both rock and wood. Casting rock outcroppings alone

and the scattered wood did not produce a strike. What started out as a wash, turned into a good day. I have been fishing this pattern ever since, and it is something I have kept secret for years. Ironically, when smallmouth are holding in typical areas, this pattern is non-productive.

Both lipless crankbaits and standard crankbaits are effective, both having their place when fishing a rocky shoreline. Which style crankbait will be most effective will be determined by both how tight the smallmouth are holding to the rocks, and how aggressive they are. Lipless crankbaits will allow an angler to cover water quickly and find any active smallmouth.

Rip rap shorelines can hold tons of crayfish and minnows which will attract schools of smallmouth. Start casting randomly both parallel and perpendicular to the shoreline. If you don't connect with a fish, make your next cast at a different angle and concentrate on different depths until contact is made. It is also important to vary the speed of your retrieve. Eventually, you will find the right combination with the proper retrieve speed and depth. One retrieve that has worked for me is to start out with a fast retrieve, and give the crankbait an occasional jerk. Let the crankbait drop a few feet after the jerk and then continue a fast retrieve. Lipless crankbaits are plastic, and can have an intense rattling sound. This Rip-N-Crank presentation can trigger a strike from the largest smallmouth in the lake.

If smallmouth are holding tight to the rocks and won't budge from the food and cover you will need to run a crankbait down into the rocks. This bump and crank retrieve is very deadly under this situation. I start out with a deep diving crankbait that will dive deeper than the rocks I am targeting. Crank the bait until the lip hits the rocks and then jerk the crankbait. Wait a few seconds and continue the retrieve and repeat the motion until you connect with a smallmouth. Stay alert since strikes can be savage; even a 15 incher can jerk the rod out of your hand.



Northwoods Sporting Goods

**Live Bait
Fishing Supplies
License
Guns - Ammo**



Outdoor Gear



Don Bader 410 E Main Street - Lena 920-829-5533