

The Resourceful River Smallmouth

By Jon Graham

The stream smallmouth bass is an amazing creature well known for its ability to give anglers an exhilarating jaw-dropping tussle full of jumps and surges. While most anglers feel the stream smallie's greatest attributes revolve around their aggressive, powerful nature, I would argue that what makes stream smallies so incredible is their ability to thrive in many different riverine environments.

During my early searches for stream bronzebacks, I always concentrated my efforts in streams or areas that contained large amounts of rock. Of course, it is no secret that love smallies love rocks! I can remember my early days of chasing stream bronziez where I would not even take the time to fish a stream if I did not spy large amounts of rocky substrate. Boy, if I knew then what I know now, my search for more and better streams would have been much more encompassing. Over the last twenty years or so I have fished in excess of thirty-five different streams in the Midwest – most of them here in Illinois. I have learned and experienced many things. One of which is the fact that, while there is a correlation between rocks and smallies, rocks are not the end all, be all, when it comes to locating riverine bronzebacks.

Now, before I go any further, I do not want any reader to think for one moment that I am discounting the rock/smallmouth relationship. Rocks and smallies do go hand-in-hand like a hot dog and a ballgame, but the stream bass is very resourceful. Stream brownies can and do thrive in streams that are not laden with beautiful boulders or riffles filled with cobble and gravel. My searches and adventures have proved this to me many times over!

Case in point is a small river located in North-Central Illinois. Calling this flow a river is somewhat of a stretch. In fact, it is really a glorified drainage ditch. Many moons ago almost all the natural bends and meanders were taken away by man's wishes to expedite field drainage. What is left is a straightened stream with banks that measure fifteen feet high. Trust me, this river is nothing to look at. Natural rock is non-existent. A few enlightened farmers have thrown chunks of concrete, bricks, or anything else they want to get rid of (including old cars and tractors) into the ditch hoping to control erosion. This river has very few riffles and has a bottom substrate of

sand. So what you have is a drainage ditch with no classic smallmouth habitat at all!

Guess what? The smallies absolutely love this river, and not just any smallmouths, but some truly trophy specimens. What this river lacks in classic rock habitat, it more than makes up for in clear water. This stream runs crystal clear most of the year – a factor I believe makes a big difference when it comes to locating consistent, smallmouth-producing streams. In addition, this straight ribbon of water always has an outstanding base current speed. No matter how low the water gets in this river, the current speed is just right for Mr. Smallmouth.

So where do the smallies live in this particular flow? The answer is simple: they utilize the resources they are presented with. More specifically, they inhabit any scour hole created by the shifting sand. If you combine a sand bottom with good current flow, you are going to find some very large and deep scour holes. This river has them and they are a gold mine for big riverine bronzebacks. Additionally, the bass in this river will utilize any object for cover. For instance, how about fishing around old car and tractor parts? It sounds crazy, but a smallie does not distinguish the difference between a rock and the bumper of off a '67 chevy. All in all, it is just a case of the river smallmouth using the present resources to their advantage.

Another stream in the, "looks are deceiving" category is one in which weeds are the prominent feature. This stream, located in central Illinois, is fairly small with very few riffles, very few large rocks, good current flow, and clear water. During the heat of the summer this stream, at first glance, looks as though it is being "choked" by all the weed growth. Most anglers would drive over the stream and in no way equate its appearance with river smallmouth. But once again, the river bronzeback is an amazing creature. The smallies that inhabit this flow have adapted and use the heavy weed growth to their advantage. In fact, clumps of weeds in this river are used much the same way the bass would use larger rocks in more typical flows. Smallies can be seen tucked behind large clumps of weeds – using the weed clumps as current buffers much like they would use boulders if they were



available. It is truly an amazing sight. Catching very large smallmouths from a body of water that looks more suited to the "ugly" cousin of the smallmouth is a very unique experience.

A third stream that helps to prove that Mr. Smallmouth is a cunning, resourceful, finned creature is the Sangamon River. Located in Central Illinois, this river is known as a catfish and carp flow.

But.....ahhhhh, not so fast. There are some smallies to be found for those who are willing to look. The Sangamon has little rock, few riffles, a silty bottom for the most part, and turbid water. Once again, this stream will not be gracing any postcards or calendars in the near future.

But what the Sangamon does have is wood cover. Most rookie smallmouth river fishermen ignore wood cover as a likely smallmouth hangout. Many bass chasers associate wood cover with the Largemouth Bass. While Largies love wood as well, the river smallmouth will strongly relate to wood in a stream where other types of cover are non-existent; once again, using the resources available. While this river will never be listed as one of Illinois' finest, it still contains a fishable population of brown fish for those anglers who like a challenge and a little adventure. Rest assured smallies in this stream have seen nary a lure in quite some time.

So what is the moral to my ramble? Well, for one, looks are deceiving. A stream, at first glance, may not look like a "normal" smallmouth flow. But what is normal? An angler may feel that "normal" is a clear stream with mixed sizes of rock, beautiful, cascading riffles, and deep, boulder-filled pools. Sure there are a few flows like that here in Illinois, but for the most part, those streams are taking much of the angling pressure. Streams that are hidden gems

tucked back into far away places and which lack that "normal" smallmouth look, are the types of rivers that really excite me. These flows may not have that classic bass look, but make no mistake, the stream smallmouth bass is not embarrassed to live here. Remember too, that, with limited fishing pressure, comes the very realistic possibility of tangling with a monster smallmouth. Riverine bass that are not constantly tormented by anglers have a tendency to grow quite large—all the better for the angler who is willing to put the time and effort into finding those out of the way flows.

The second moral to my rant is the idea that smallmouths are incredibly resourceful and adaptive. They can survive and thrive under many different types of riverine habitats. They do not require a ton of rock per mile or two riffles for every 500 yards of stream. While there are no written guidelines on what smallies find suitable, we know of course that they seem to flourish in clear water streams with a good amount of cover and depth; but how that cover and depth is accounted for can vary. Large rocks, cars, tractors, wood, and bails of wire are just a few of the objects that river bass can call home. In short, stream smallmouths will use whatever cover they can find to feel safe and secure. As an angler it is important to never discount any type of cover just because it is not "natural". The angler who takes advantage of the smallmouth's resourceful nature will be rewarded with countless hours of fish-catching excitement. Even better, that same angler will almost undoubtedly be alone!

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