



# Topwater smallmouth



The Menominee River is a topwater aficionado's delight. Not only is the Menominee River user friendly for topwater baits, but the angler has a real chance of landing a 20-inch bronze back spring through fall. Some waters see a hot topwater bite when smallmouth are on their beds, but once spawning is completed you'd best put your favorite topwater baits back in the tackle box. However, I am fortunate in that the only month in which I have not caught a 20 inch smallmouth on a topwater bait on the Menominee River has been November. In November the water temperature is usually below 40 degrees and a cold front seems to pass through every other day.

Although the topwater bite was sporadic in 2011, when the bite was on it was fantastic. The biggest problem most anglers have with topwater fishing is in knowing when to admit defeat. You can be on the best water around, but if conditions aren't right, you won't stick any fish. This is particularly true during the pre-spawn when weather and water conditions are unpredictable. The good news is if they won't hit on top, they will hit plastics or suspending jerkbaits.

As is typical of many springs up here in the Northwoods, the topwater bite was slow to get started last spring due to the unstable weather. I think my clients and I boated four smallmouth the first few weeks of the season on topwater baits, but cleaned house with Case Sinking Minnows and Case Magic Sticks rigged wacky style. The Case Sinking Minnow is a heavily salted soft plastic jerkbait that slowly sinks and can be fished like a suspended jerkbait. This minnow will catch big smallmouth under any conditions. In all my 30 years of guiding, I have yet to have a productive day of topwater fishing when dealing with irregular weather patterns and have learned to bring along a supply of plastics. Visit [www.caseplastics.com](http://www.caseplastics.com) for more information on these baits.

The good news is that we eventually rode out the weather and by the third week in May the weather began to stabilize and the topwater bite started to heat up. Smallmouth were on the move and were eager to smack a properly placed surface bait. Note that the key words here are "properly placed" surface bait. You can be on the best water and have the hottest bait on the market but the name of the

game, as in real estate, is still location, location, location! I have had several days during the pre-spawn period where we had exceptional days on the water while fishing topwater baits and observed other anglers not being able to raise a fish. This was due both to their location and their choice of baits.

On May 19<sup>th</sup> I was fishing with a client and we boated 12 smallmouth between 18-20 inches with half of the big smallmouth caught on the Hubs Chub. I started my client out with a Case Sinking Minnow and I followed up behind him with a Bone/Shad Hubs Chub. It didn't take long for my client to connect with a 19 inch smallmouth with the Case Sinking Minnow and he caught several other smallmouth between 14-16 inches during our first hour on the water. However, the guide, yours truly, could not get a strike on the Topwater bait.

My client continued to catch smallmouth on the Case Sinking Minnow and a few on the Case Magic Stick but I didn't catch a smallmouth on the Hubs Chub until about 11 am. I casted the Hubs Chub tight to a downed tree along a rock shoreline and after a few short pops the water exploded and I watched a 20 inch smallmouth fly out of the water. It was my first smallmouth of the day, but well worth the wait.

I handed my client a Hubs Chub and coached him on how to slowly finesse the bait tight to the shoreline and cover. After a short pop, the Hubs Chub drops vertically in the water and the BB's in the lure cause it to quiver. An active smallmouth will often hammer the Hubs Chub but a neutral smallmouth will be attracted to the quivering and suck in the bait and slowly pull it under. So the angler needs to be prepared since there is no set way that the smallmouth will hit the bait.

All topwater baits are not the same; some have a greater tendency to trigger strikes from big smallmouth. One such bait is in fact the Hubs Chub made by HC Baits. The Hubs Chub has a rear prop but the front of the bait is beveled, making it a cross between a popping bait and a prop bait. Its vertical presentation attracts huge smallmouth that refuse other surface baits. The explosive surface attacks that you'll experience with this lure are matched by no other surface bait on the market, with the three inch bait being ideal for river smallmouth. The best pre-spawn colors are Crawdad, Bone Shad, Clear, Tennessee Shad and Chrome/Chart. The Hubs Chub will out-catch any other surface bait 3 to 1. [www.hcbaits.com](http://www.hcbaits.com) When using the three inch Hubs Chub I prefer a spinning rod and I spool my reel with Yo-Zuri Hybrid Ultra Soft Line.

The topwater bite this year continued to be consistent through the entire pre-spawn and spawning period. On one day in early June we caught 65 smallmouth on the Hubs Chub. Since the topwater bite was good, one of my clients decided to switch to one of his favorite topwater baits, which will remain unnamed in order to protect the guilty! He caught smallmouth, but his numbers started to decrease. I told him that his bait of choice did not have a vertical drop and that it's the vertical drop of the Hubs Chub along with the quivering motion that puts those extra bass in the boat. While he did manage to catch a few smallmouth on his favorite bait, his partner who continued to use the Hubs Chub caught twice as many smallmouth in addition to catching the big fish of the day.

By mid-June smallmouth spawning is usually complete in the Northwoods and it is not necessarily the catching that is difficult but simply locating the fish that can be a problem. Smallmouth scatter in the river as they search for food. On natural lakes and reservoirs some smallmouth will remain in the shallows while others head for deep water. You can find a boat load of fish in fresh weeds one day and the next day the spot is dead. River and reservoir smallmouth are usually easier to catch during the post-spawn than lake smallmouth.

Topwater baits are not the best choice in baits when searching for post-spawn bass, and are more effective once you locate a concentration of smallmouth. When looking for active smallmouth anglers will fare much better during the post-spawn using crankbaits or spinnerbaits. Some days you will catch only scattered smallmouth with a spinnerbait or crankbait and a topwater bait won't trigger many strikes. If you find a concentration of smallmouth relating to a specific type of structure, a topwater bait can be used in combination with a spinnerbait, crankbait or plastics.

By early July, river smallmouth become easy to pattern. While it is far from an exact pattern, even on a slow day smallmouth can be caught by using the process of elimination. Sooner or later if you employ this method you will connect with active smallmouth. When guiding, I will start one of my clients out using a topwater bait, while the other client or I fish with a Case Sinking Minnow or a Case Magic Stick rigged wacky style. Between the plastics and the topwater it usually doesn't take long to develop a pattern.

When using the Hubs Chub in summer, the secret is to vary your presentation until you find the preferred offering for the day. Given a typical day, the same slow finesse presentation will catch the most smallmouth on the Menominee River. However, on any given day there is a certain percentage of smallmouth that will strike a faster more erratic retrieve. The more an angler varies their topwater presentations, the more smallmouth they will catch.

On July 8<sup>th</sup> we had a day of topwater fishing on the Menominee River that most anglers can only dream about. We boated over 60 fish on topwater baits with several of the smallmouth being over 18 inches. For the first two hours we could not get even one smallmouth to show any interest in anything but a case Minnow rigged wacky style. The important thing was that we were catching smallmouth and my clients were content. I knew that there was a good chance that we could catch smallmouth on topwater baits as the day progressed, but I didn't mention it to my clients since I wanted them to catch fish and the wacky worm was already working. Why change a good thing?

While it was a good day of fishing so far one of my clients suggested that it was time to break for lunch. His partner agreed and they relaxed and took in the sights on the Menominee River. We were on a good stretch of river and since my clients were relaxing, I picked up my rod with a Crawdad Hubs Chub and on the third cast connected with a hefty 16 inch smallmouth. One of my clients put down his sandwich and netted the fish for me and it was quickly returned to the river to fight another day. Before he could get back to his meal, another smallmouth attacked my Hubs Chub after a short pop.

I looked at my client and said, "You want one of these," and he replied, "What do you think?"

He tied on a Crawdad Hubs Chub and soon caught an 18 incher. A few seconds later, my other client asked, "Where's Mine?"

The client using the slow popping retrieve was using a Crawdad Hubs Chub and the client using the fast retrieve was using a Bone/Shad Hubs Chub. I was making occasional casts with the new Black/Gold Hubs Chub and also caught smallmouth so the color did not seem to matter. On one cast I would slowly finesse the Hubs Chub and on the next cast I would use a fast jerk retrieve and on occasion I would just buzz the Hubs Chub across the surface. I caught smallmouth on all three presentations. Try and do that with any other surface bait!

We did not use a wacky worm the rest of the day as the smallmouth kept pounding the Hubs Chub. My client in the front of the boat was catching smallmouth using a fast jerk and pause retrieve and the client in the rear of the boat was using a short pop and pause retrieve. By using two different retrieves, one fast and one slow, we were able to catch both the aggressive and neutral smallmouth. The versatility of the Hubs Chub will put more smallmouth in the boat than any other surface bait. By the way, my clients never did finish their lunch that day!

The entire month of July was excellent for topwater fishing and the Hubs Chub lead the way as the most productive bait. The only problem with August is that we had some unstable weather that would often put a damper on the topwater bite. If we had stable weather we pounded the smallmouth on the Hubs chub and if we had unstable weather we pounded smallmouth with the Case Sinking Minnow and the Case Magic Stick rigged wacky style.

## Hot Colors on the Menominee River



**Crawdad**



**Bone Shad**



**Frog**



**Chart/Chrome**



Most of the smallmouth we caught on the Hubs Chub in August were caught with a slow presentation; the color seemed to be quite important. I had a few days where smallmouth would only hit one particular color and presentation. In fact, we had one day when the preferred color changed three times even though the conditions remained the same. The lesson learned here is that when fishing topwater, color does matter.

Another hot period for topwater smallmouth is early September. Here again, the weather patterns are important with the best topwater bite occurring during stable weather. The first few weeks of September saw stable weather and great topwater fishing. In September the best topwater fishing is at mid-day when the water is at its warmest.

The topwater bite was great last year and it should be great again in 2012. Maximize your success by remembering to be versatile in your retrieve and choice in color. Remember as well that there is never a sure thing so bring along a few bags of plastic just in case.