

Pre-Spawn Smallmouth

Transition areas can be prime staging areas for big pre-spawn females. As water temperatures rise during the day females will start to roam the shallows and continue doing so until the sun starts to wane, causing the water temperature to reverse its procedure. Once the water temperature drops only a few degrees the female smallmouth begin to move. As they move out of the shallows they will often stack up along the first transition from soft to hard bottom and on many lakes or reservoirs this is usually a steep rock shoreline.

Big smallmouth will hold tightly to the steep rock transitions overnight and remain there the next day until the water temperature repeats its procedure. Even if the transition is not present smallmouth will use steep rock banks as migration routes from deep to shallow water. Most anglers will launch their boat and head into the shallows and pass up the honey hole. The smart angler will stop at the transition, cast a suspending jerkbait, soft plastic jerkbait, grub, jig and minnow or a crankbait and start the day with a few big smallmouth.

Don't make the mistake of passing up the transition in the morning and heading for the shallows. You might catch a few small males while fishing the shallows and you might even have some fun, but if the water temperature drops overnight the big fish will not be there. If you wait to fish the transition until late morning you will also find a lack of big fish. As the day progresses and the water temperature rises a few degrees the temperature will trigger smallmouth to head back towards the shallows. This might not be a quick movement and the fish will spread out and be tough to locate, making for tough fishing.



By late afternoon smallmouth will be back suspending off the edge of the transition and be very catchable. In fact, the first time I caught big smallmouth relating to a transition was in the afternoon when the bite in the shallows had stopped. I had about an hour left on a guide trip and decided to give a steep rocky shoreline a try even though I had fished it several times before during the day with little if any success. I had my client cast a crankbait, hoping to kill some time before heading back to the boat landing and then bang, after the third cast he connected with a 20 incher, which was the big smallmouth of the day. No, I did not keep the big fish for last even though my client might have thought that.

At first I did not dwell on this, thinking that my client had managed to stumble into a gift fish. I had the guy booked for the next day and how could we not make the place where he caught the big fish the day before our first stop. I was hoping that there would be at least one big smallmouth but to my

surprise my client boated 5 smallmouth in the 20 inch class. I even got into the act and caught a 20 incher with a grub. Since that time that transition along with a few others are a regular morning and afternoon stop on my guide trips.

When the water temperature climbs into the upper 50 or low 60 degree range smallmouth enter the late pre-spawn period. At that time plastics and jerkbaits remain effective but topwater baits become effective. While fishing with a topwater bait is never a guarantee the closer that smallmouth are to spawning the more predictable the topwater bite is. The topwater bite can be sporadic and you will need to make adjustments.

The most critical factor when using topwater baits in spring is finding the proper retrieve. Unlike summer when smallmouth will strike a variety of retrieves, in spring they can be very selective. A case in point was one early spring day when I was fishing on the Menominee River with a new client. We had caught several quality smallmouth on a combination of soft plastics and jerkbaits off a rock/sand transition area adjacent to an island. About midday my client inquired about the possibility of catching smallmouth on top. I told him let's give it a try since the water temperature is on the rise and smallmouth are on the move.

As we cautiously approached the island I pointed to a point on the south end of the island and gave my client a 4 inch Bone Shad Hubs Chub. I instructed my client to cast the Hubs Chub tight to the shoreline, let the lure sit a few seconds then pull the lure about one foot and let the rear of the bait drop vertically. I stressed that it was important not to pull the lure too far and too let it sit about five seconds before continuing the retrieve.

For whatever the reason my client could not get it just right although he did manage to get a few strikes. He would either pull the lure to far or not let it pause long enough. He was fishing in the front of the boat and after about 10 minutes I began cast a four inch frog pattern Hubs Chub from the rear casting deck hoping to stick a few smallmouth. I suggested that my client refrain from casting and watch closely how I was working the Hubs Chub.

I made about a half dozen cast and my client watched ever so patiently, asking a few questions along the way. Finally the water exploded as we approached the north end of the island. My client said, "That fish inhaled that lure after it sat for a few seconds." It was a big 22 inch pre-spawn female.

Eventually my client did master the retrieve and caught a few big smallmouth on the 4 inch bone shad Hubs Chub. After I caught that big smallmouth my client had to trouble letting the lure pause and drop. Spring smallmouth action can be consistent if you target transitions early and late. If you are lucky and the weather is stable and the water temperature is on the rise by midday, bring out the topwater lure.

