

Pre-spawn Smallmouth Under Tough Conditions



Fishing for pre-spawn smallmouth is never predictable in the Northwoods. In my 35 years of guiding I have yet to experience a spring where everything goes as planned. I enjoy a challenge but the spring of 2017 was especially taxing. In early May, the Menominee River water level was just below flood stage and the water temperature refused to rise, thanks to the continuous cold front that seemed to hang on forever. While on my favorite lakes, the 42 degree water temperature kept smallmouth in deep water for a few weeks longer than normal; that said, the fishing was great!

Most of the time, when the catch and release smallmouth bass season opens on the first Saturday in May the Menominee River is an easy choice for early season action. However, with the high water my options were limited on the river. Fishing deep clear lakes would also not be a good option due to the cold water temperatures. My schedule was booked the first two weeks of May and I had to figure something out, and quick. The only option that I had was to fish reservoirs or flowages as they are called in Wisconsin. My plan was to find the warmest possible water and avoid fast current.

I was getting things ready on Friday May fifth for the Saturday opener when the phone rang. It was my client for the next day who questioned the less than desirable weather forecast, especially the northwest winds. He was a first time client and it was obvious he wanted to cancel even before he heard my predictions.

So now I had the day off and the plan was to go fishing by myself. Even though the conditions were tough I had not wet a line since returning from Louisiana three weeks previously.

On a cold spring morning there is no need to be on the water as the sun rises unless you are looking for walleyes. It was about 9:00 am when I made my first cast on High Falls Flowage. The first spot I decided to fish was a rip rap shoreline on the edge of a shallow bay. This shoreline is typically a magnet for pre-spawn smallmouth, so I positioned my boat parallel to the shoreline and began casting a white four inch ribbed body swim bait on a 3/8 ounce jighead both perpendicular and parallel to the shoreline. I figured that, due to the turbid water, white would be the most visible color. After a while I switched to a Case Magic Stik rigged on a 3/0 wide gap hook, and then to a suspending jerkbait. Eventually I reverted back to a swimbait since it is my confidence bait in cold water. After about 30 minutes I knew it was time to make a move.

The next spot was the back side of a large island with two points protruding into deep water. I was out of the wind and that was fine since during the pre-spawn you can avoid the wind and find smallmouth. That is a huge benefit to fishing a reservoir in the spring compared to a large natural lake, or even the Great Lakes, you can avoid the wind and catch fish! I started with the same white swimbait and after about a dozen casts I finally connected with a fish. My first smallmouth of 2017 was a 19 incher that was holding in about eight feet of water on the deep edge of a rock point. My electronics showed plenty of fish so I assumed things were going to happen.

Things were looking up but it took about another 30 minutes before I stuck another smallmouth. The wind had picked up and I decided to spend my time working this area since I knew it held fish. I ended up boating five smallmouth for four hours of fishing and they were all over 18 inches. Not bad for fishing in the middle of a cold front.

When choosing a swimbait for pre-spawn smallmouth, both in stained and clear water, I prefer a 3.5 to 4 inch ribbed body bait. My favorite swimbait is the Case 3.75 inch Lil Magic Swim with the top producing colors in stained water being Pearl Shiner and Albino Shad. The action is perfect regardless of the speed of your retrieve. I fish them on a jighead between 1/8 and 1/2 ounce. The weight of the head depends on the preferred depth. I like to start retrieving the swimbait about a foot or two off the bottom. After I effectively work the bottom, I use a lighter jighead and fish higher in the water column. When the water temperature is below 50 degrees a slow rolling retrieve is desired. If you use too fast of a retrieve you will get short strikes. If the water temperature rises during the day then you can increase the speed of your retrieve.

The next few days the weather improved a bit and I told my clients that the name of the game was quality fish. I knew we were not going to find numbers of cooperating smallmouth but I also knew that if they kept their focus they would connect with some lunkers. We had to be persistent but each day on the water we managed to boat smallmouth in the 20 inch class. Smallmouth were scattered but they were catchable. Swim baits caught the most fish along with suspending jerkbaits and soft plastic jerkbaits.

By the second week of May the water temperature climbed to the upper 50 degree range and everything looked great until another horrendous cold front moved in and put another kink in my plans. Smallmouth vacated the typical staging areas and headed for cover. They did not move far but stacked up tight to stumps adjacent to spawning areas. They were holding so tight to the wood in six to eight feet of water that I don't think the best electronics could have located them. Swim baits continued to catch the most fish but Case Magic Sticks also caught some dandy smallmouth. One day I had a client who liked to fish finesse jigs and he brought several along. He did catch some dandy smallmouth but the many stumps also ate their share of jigs, and he went home with one jig left.

By the end of May the action really got hot even though the weather remained cool. Not only did we increase our numbers but the big fish continued to cooperate. My clients caught several big smallmouth with the three inch Hubs Chub topwater bait. The vertical drop of the Hubs Chub makes it the ideal pre-spawn topwater bait. If you are fishing in big fish water the four inch Hubs chub can be especially deadly on big smallmouth. Most anglers fish topwater baits too fast in spring resulting in catching less smallmouth. The good topwater bite continued through the middle of June.

It was a time of plenty as the pre-spawn smallmouth bite in the Northwoods always is, but you need to be ready for whatever Mother Nature throws at you. When you're ready to book that spring smallmouth trip or gather more information on Hubs Chub Topwater Baits, go to bigsmallmouthbass.com or call 715-854-2055. Subscribe to my youtube channel [smguide1](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsmguide1).

