

Topwater Action and River Smallmouth



Every angler likes to catch smallmouth bass with topwater lures. If you are a topwater aficionado as I am, you quickly learn that rivers offer the best opportunities. I am fortunate to do most of my smallmouth fishing on the Menominee River where the topwater bite is excellent. The topwater bite on most rivers is predictable even under tough conditions like we experienced in 2017. My clients were able to consistently catch smallmouth with topwater baits spring, summer and fall. Try that on big water or a natural lake!

The high water pushed loads of pre-spawn smallmouth shallow even with the 45 degree water temperature. We caught most of the smallmouth with soft plastics, but each day we managed to catch a few dandy smallmouth on topwater baits. The topwater bite occurred around mid-day and was best when the sun was out. All it took was a slight rise in the water temperature and the topwater bite was on. The three inch Hubs Chub with its vertical drop was irresistible for pre-spawn smallmouth cruising the shallows. It was an easy presentation. Cast the Hubs Chub, give it a pop, let the rear of the bait drop vertically and pause. As the hubs chub drops, the bb's inside the lure cause the lure to quiver slowly in the water and trigger the strike.

The post spawn is a time for recovery and larger female smallmouth don't move any farther from spawning areas than needed. They relate to cover, preferring to avoid the main current flow, and gradually start searching for food. Males are more mobile as they search for food but can be tough to pattern as food is at a premium. Smallmouth activity levels depend on the water temperature and the prevailing weather. Stable weather means rising water temperatures and a blossoming ecosystem.

Fishing the post spawn can be unpredictable, even under good conditions, but add rising water levels and you have a tough bite. This past June, due to both the high water and swift current, the smallmouth were in no hurry to move away from the shoreline. The good news was that crawfish and baitfish were also hugging the bank making for a topwater bonanza.

After a bit of searching I found several places on the Menominee River where smallmouth were stacked up along undercut banks. Not only were the smallmouth able to avoid the swift current but there was also plenty of forage present. The only problem I had was that my clients had to cast tight to the bank without snagging the overhanging cover. If the cast fell short of the bank by more than one foot there was no strike. When the topwater lure landed a few inches from the bank the odds were pretty good a smallmouth would explode on the lure.

The 3 inch Hubs chub is ideal under this situation. When the Hubs Chub hits the water, let it sit a few seconds, then give it a sharp pop. Next let the hubs chub drop vertically into the water and keep a tight line. On the vertical drop the hubs chub will quiver in the current and trigger a strike. A deadly pattern is to let the hubs chub drift with the current and give it a slight pop. If no strike occurs give the lure another pop and let it drop again. It is important not to pull the lure away from the shoreline, just let it drift tight to the shoreline while continuing the pop 'n' drop presentation.

I had an elderly man fishing with me for a few days the second week of June and things did not go well. I showed him the pop 'n' stop presentation, caught a few smallmouth to demonstrate and I thought everything would be just fine. However, my client made several casts and they all fell way too short of the bank. In a normal year his casts would have caught a few smallmouth since the fish would have moved away from the bank to strike the lure. I positioned the boat as closely to the shoreline as I felt would not disrupt the fishing and he did catch a couple of smallmouth.

Eventually, I rigged him up a wacky rig with a four inch Case Magic Stick and he managed to catch a few more smallmouth. What should have been a banner day of topwater fishing was only fair at best due to my clients' limitations. A guide can put his clients on fish but the rest is up to them, even if the result is the client being convinced that the fish are not biting.

As summer progressed, water levels gradually dropped and the topwater bite remained consistent. As the water dropped the smallmouth became more aggressive and strikes would occur at any time during the retrieve. So, if my client made a short cast, no big deal, the odds were good that he would get a strike. We caught fish with topwater baits everyday in June, July, and August with the three-inch hubs chub catching the most fish.

Every day the bite was different. On some days the pop 'n' stop presentation worked best but on other days we pulled the hubs chub about a foot, let it drop and then buzzed it across the water. The advantage to the hubs chub is you can make several casts and work the bait differently on each cast. Few topwater baits offer such options. It was a great summer and when the topwater bite did slow down the Case Plastics saved the day. Case Magic Sticks and Sinking Minnows seem to catch fish anytime on the Menominee River.

There is always a good topwater bite in September but this September it was exceptional. During the first two weeks of September I experienced some fantastic fishing. The smallmouth were hitting on top no matter where we fished. We would catch them in the weeds, on the rocks and tight to shoreline cover. In fact, most of the time we did not even use anything but topwater baits the entire day. Just when the topwater bite seemed to slow, before we had a chance to switch to plastics someone got another strike.

By the third week of September the topwater bite slowed and plastics became our mainstay. We caught an occasional big smallmouth with topwater baits through late October. This is a characteristically typical late season topwater bite; not a lot of heavy action but big fish. The best late fall topwater bite occurs during stable weather conditions.

If you are looking to catch topwater smallmouth this year, concentrate on rivers.

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