

FALL RIVER SMALLMOUTH

Weeds are first on my list during the fall. Even though weeds can hold smallmouth in summer, the bite can be unpredictable. One day you will find active smallmouth and the next day there isn't a fish to be found. This unpredictable bite is due to the forage. In summer, food is plentiful and schools of baitfish will migrate as they feed on a variety of smaller baitfish, insect larva and plankton. Basically, smallmouth are just following the food chain.

The key to the weed smallmouth river bite is a major drop in the water temperature. Cool nights can cause a sharp drop in the water temperature. This drop in the water temperature will push scattered baitfish out of the decaying weeds and they will school up along the weedline. On a cool crisp frosty fall morning it is not unusual to connect with a load of spirited bronzebacks foraging on an easy meal.

Several presentations are effective but topwater baits are my first choice, and being a topwater aficionado I never miss out on an opportunity. The topwater bite can also be incredible. As a guide I dream of these situations, for I have yet to encounter a client who is not quick to tie on a topwater bait. If the water temperature rises later in the day, the topwater bite will continue but smallmouth will start to roam the weedline making the topwater bite less effective. If the water temperature does not rise smallmouth will remain bunched up.



Although the topwater bite can be explosive the catching will take patience. The trick is to cover water effectively. If I don't get a quick response with the topwater lure, I will have one of my clients switch to a spinnerbait. The spinnerbait is a better search bait and enable the angler to make faster casts. Once you stick a fish with either bait, continue to use both baits until you determine that there is a definite topwater bite. Prop baits work best when fishing weedlines. Prop baits create more commotion and better resemble surfacing baitfish. Occasionally, I will cast a popper and if the smallmouth are in a more neutral mood it will be the ticket. If you are on big fish water then try giving the four inch Hubs Chub a try. The four inch Hubs Chub will produce plenty of big fall smallmouth on all types of water but it is particularly effective in rivers. If there is a chop on the water, walking the dog is the preferred presentation. If you are confronted with calm conditions or a slight ripple on the water, I prefer to pop the Hubs Chub. I have caught smallmouth on both the three inch and four inch Hubs Chub with water temperatures as low as 45 degrees.

On some days, smallmouth prefer a measured presentation and a spinnerbait or crankbait won't get the job done. That is why I carry a good supply of soft plastic jerkbaits. Twitching a soft plastic jerkbait in shallow weeds can trigger strikes when all else seems to fail. They are also a follow up bait after you have caught several smallmouth with a topwater, spinnerbait or crankbait.

Just as when fishing the river grass in summer, it is important to fish both the weeds and the weed line. The Case Sinking Shad is my favorite fall bait for weed related smallmouth and largemouth bass. When fishing weeds I will work the Sinking Shad at a moderate speed looking for aggressive bass. When working the weedline, I work the jerkbait slowly and let it drop along the weedline. I catch big bass with both presentations.

Imitating the preferred forage is important. Fishing a soft plastic jerkbait along the edge of a creek channel or slough is the best way that I know to imitate a live red tail chub or shiner. Make sure you effectively fish the area by working the top and mid sections of the water column. Cast the jerkbait rigged with a 4/0 wide gap hook right on the edge of the creek channel and close to weeds. Once the bait hits the

surface I will give it a vigorous twitch then reel up the slack as quickly as possible in anticipation of a savage strike. If a bass does not inhale the jerkbait, give it another twitch and let it sink along the edge of the weeds. Then after about five seconds give it a few short twitches making sure your line is taught. Watch your line since a big smallmouth will head for deep water. If you see your line moving toward deep water reel in the slack before setting the hook.

On one cold October day my clients and I caught a load of big smallmouth on the edge of a small creek. It was one of those days when after a few hours of short strikes and missed fish I knew my clients would be happy if they caught a few 18 inch smallmouth. Making matters worse, I was unable to get my hands on any red tail chubs or any other usable minnows. So I headed up-river to one of my favorite holes, but without any minnows on this cold front day I had low expectations.

I positioned my boat downstream from the slough and the creek channel, dropped the trolling motor and instructed the client in the front of the boat to cast a spinnerbait and the guy in the back to cast a Case sinking Shad. The guy with the spinnerbait did not get a strike as he worked the bait over the weeds. However, the results were different with the guy casting the soft plastic jerkbait. On his third cast he yelled "Fish on" and I responded by netting a 19 inch smallmouth.

Usually after one of my clients catches a big fish I don't have the other client switch immediately but under these conditions I told him to make a change. We spent the next 45 minutes moving back and forth along the creek channel, ultimately catching 20 smallmouth without so much as one being under 18 inches. We made a few stops at other spots but returned a few hours later and caught another dozen smallmouth with soft plastic jerkbaits. It was truly another great day on the river.



As far as color goes, I seldom use a jerkbait that does not imitate a baitfish. Look into my bag of tricks and you will find white, pearl, and white with silver and gold flakes. On occasion I will throw a natural colored bait like green pumpkin or watermelon on a clear water lake. When fishing deep clear water lakes it is important to use fluorocarbon line, which will allow the jerkbait to sink to its maximum depth.

Soft plastic jerkbaits catch their share of grass related smallmouth but on some days it's hard to beat a red tail chub. One September day I fished with two clients who never fished the Menominee River. It was a foggy morning and I had to go for a boat ride since there was an ex-client parked in my honey hole close to the boat landing. I must admit that over the past ten years this has become a problem for me as clients use my services so they can find a hot spot and then sit on it until they fish it out. Many of them bamboozle me into thinking they are catch and release fisherman but I continuously watch them place 20 inch smallmouth into the live well. These 10-12 year old smallmouth deserve a better destiny than ending up on the edge of a fillet knife. That is why God made walleyes and perch. I guess it is a sign of the times and something I just have to deal with, but I wish these people would think of the longer term impact they are having on the fishery before they eat every smallmouth they catch.

Anyway, after a tricky boat ride in the dense fog, due primarily due to the many dead heads in the river, I approached my favorite fall honey hole. I dropped the trolling motor and told my clients to cast their red tail chubs to the right. As soon as the chub hit the water one of the clients had a smallmouth breaking water and within a few seconds, the other client also acknowledged that he also had a fish on. This was the start of a great day on the water.

After we boated a bunch of nice fish I explained to my clients why this spot held so many smallmouth. I pointed out that there is a mid-river ridge that runs down the center of the river. On the outer edge of the ridge the rocks drop from four to eight feet. Grass is abundant on the shallow part of the ridge which attracts a variety of baitfish making it an ideal feeding area. On the deep edge of the ridge, boulders break the current and attract non-feeding smallmouth. I told my clients that this makes for ideal habitat that will hold large numbers of smallmouth through ice up. It took me a while to explain this to my clients since they kept interrupting me with the fish they were catching.

I fish several areas like this on the Menominee River and year after year they consistently produce for me. If forage is abundant they attract smallmouth and if forage is limited smallmouth are still attracted to the area. In seven hours we boated over 60 smallmouth with about 50 percent of the fish measuring between 18 to 20 inches. Now that is fantastic smallmouth fishing in anyone's book. After we ran out of chubs we continued to catch a bunch of smallmouth with Case Sinking Minnows.

Fall river smallmouth will cooperate just as well as they do in the summer. The best part, besides their seemingly endless activity, is their size. At no other time of year can anglers expect to catch multiple trophy fish without moving more than a few times. Simply put, if you catch one big smallmouth I guarantee there are more in the area. I personally can't wait for this time of year, even though I know that living in the northwoods my time on the water is limited.