

Topwater Tips



River smallmouth will hit a variety of presentations, but given the choice I prefer to fish them on top. I have yet to meet an angler who does not like to catch smallmouth bass on topwater baits. With the exception of muskies, a big smallmouth hitting a topwater bait may be the ultimate thrill in freshwater. After you catch a few smallmouth on top it is hard to switch to another bait. Some anglers would rather catch one or two smallmouth on top than several fish with other presentations.

The best topwater action will occur under stable weather conditions. Simply put, if you have a hot summer with few weather changes the topwater bite can be awesome. However, when we experience a cool summer with continuous cold fronts, the topwater bite can be unpredictable and even non-existent. In an average summer in the Northwoods we see a good topwater bite from late May through mid-September, but it peaks during mid to late summer.

While it might seem easy at times, the trick is in knowing when to fish a specific type of structure. On some days it will seem like you can't do anything wrong and you will be on active smallmouth from the time you launch your boat until you return back to the boat landing. However, the reality is that if you count on luck, you might as well play the lottery. Basically, what you need to do is fish topwater lures in high percentage areas at the right time. If you fish smart you can make a habit out of catching big river smallmouth on top during the summer.

On an average summer morning, I will start my clients fishing shaded shoreline, downed wood and weeds on the edge of the current. While all these areas can hold smallmouth, on any given day one area will be the most productive. There is no secret formula to unlock the mystery of what spot will be the most productive.

That said, when push comes to shove, my first stop is the weeds. Why? Because when smallmouth are roaming weeds they are on the feed! Feeding smallmouth are active smallmouth and they will find it hard to pass up a topwater lure on a warm summer morning. If there is a weed bite it won't take long to figure it out.

It is important to approach the weeds with caution especially if you are looking for big smallmouth. Many river fishermen make the mistake of fishing too fast. If your trolling motor is on high or you are drifting too fast you will not only spook larger smallmouth but you will not be able to concentrate on the food chain. Keep your eyes open for rising smallmouth and surfacing bait fish. A few surfacing baitfish can advertise that several big smallmouth are in the area.

Zero in on the commotion and cast your topwater bait at the target since your odds to connect with big smallmouth are high. There is no need to score a bull's-eye but you need to be ready for the strike. Once the lure hits the water, try to keep a tight line. It is irrelevant as to the bait you are using since you can expect the strike to occur shortly after the bait hits the water. Often the strike will occur before you get a chance to start your retrieve. If you don't get a response with a topwater bait, try a soft plastic jerkbait or a stick bait rigged wacky style.

After the weeds, my next stop would be a shaded shoreline with cover. Many river smallmouth will move to deeper water or shoreline cover after dark. As the sun rises they will remain in that cover, and while not catchable at night, they will respond to a surface bait before the sun is high. A 20-inch smallmouth can be in shallow water and aggressively strike a surface lure. The smallmouth that moved to cover at night that is exposed to the sun in the morning will migrate away from the cover. If the cover breaks to deeper water, smallmouth will move deeper and tighter to the cover and won't respond to a surface bait.

By mid-morning, those same shaded shorelines, and weeds will continue to produce smallmouth, but the odds of catching a smallmouth over 18 inches are greatly decreased. Not that catching a bunch of smallmouth between 12-16 inches is a bad thing, but if you are hunting for a big fish it might be time to take a boat ride.

To put the odds in your favor, I suggest heading upstream to shallow water with more current. In summer it is common during the heat of the day to find big smallmouth relating to submerged grass in the center of the river as long as there is sufficient current. The grass supplies plenty of shade along with a forage base of both minnows and crayfish, with the current supplying much needed oxygen once the water rises over 72 degrees.

Once you start fishing the grass it should not take long to find active smallmouth. One unforgettable late summer day the fishing was tough and I knew it was time to head for my honey hole. I started up the motor and we took a short ride upstream to one of my favorite hot spots. The spot had everything a big smallmouth could ask for; rocks, grass, plenty of shade and a downed pine tree. Knowing that this was a prime spot, my clients began casting topwater lures before I could put down the trolling motor to help slow down the drift.

Once the boat was positioned properly with my electric trolling motor, I watched as my client pitched a bone/shad hubs chub tight to the edge of a downed oak tree. The water exploded and I saw this massive smallmouth roll and wrap itself around a submerged branch. Big smallmouth have this tendency, that when hooked, they move tight to cover. The problem was not that the fish moved to cover, but that he had wrapped the line around a branch.

Thanks to my 24 volt trolling motor I was able to move towards the tree as my client kept a tight line. We got lucky and the big smallmouth rolled over the submerged branch and untangled the line. Although the fight continued fighting, eventually the fish was in the net. We did not weigh the 21-inch smallmouth but it was easily over 5 1/2 pounds. This is a trophy at any time but especially on a topwater lure. Yes, this is one of those days I will cherish for years.

Over the years, the late summer period has proven to be one of the most consistent topwater bites. Even in years when topwater smallmouth are few and far between the action picks up in late summer. If the action is good all summer then it tends to be incredible by late August and early September. With the exception of an early fall cold front, which will bring hostile northwest winds, the topwater bite is almost a sure thing.

The cool nights will cause the water temperature to drop sharply in the shallow stained river water. In spring, a drop in the water temperature will drive smallmouth deep or push them tight to submerged cover and spread lockjaw throughout the river. A drop in the water temperature overnight will push river smallmouth tight to shallow wood cover or weeds, but, they are on the feed and will crush the 4" Hubs Chub.

On a cool late summer morning in the northwoods my first stop would be a patch of grass or milfoil just out of the current. Big smallmouth will move into the vegetation at dusk after feeding, with the largest fish holding right on the seam of the current. While they will strike at a bait, they are a bit lethargic and are seldom in a chasing mood. A properly placed popper, prop bait or frog teased along the edge of the seam can trigger a strike from a behemoth smallmouth.

Try to position your boat so that your cast will allow the surface lure to move along the seam. Once you move the lure outside the seam you are out of the strike zone. As the lure moves out of the strike zone reel in and make another cast. Trust me, the big ones don't like to chase early in the day. Once the water temperature rises as the morning progresses, the game changes and they will be more aggressive; at that time, continue to retrieve back to the boat.