

FISHING THE MENOMINEE RIVER

Being a full time professional fishing guide I have to put the odds in favor of my clients and that is why most of the spring and summer I can be found fishing for river smallmouth. While there is never a sure thing, fishing for summer river smallmouth is as good as it gets. Smallmouth bass action on a river can be both exhilarating and predictable, and a pleasure for any fishing guide.

In 2016 the fishing on the Menominee River was great. The pre-spawn bite was a bit unpredictable thanks to the tenacious cold water temperatures. Once the water temperatures started to climb the fishing quickly peaked. On May 16 & 17th the big smallmouth were on the move and the action was phenomenal. My clients caught 16 smallmouth over 20 inches on a variety of lures including Case Sinking Minnows, suspending jerkbaits and three inch Hubs Chubs.

Thanks to sporadic weather patterns we experienced this past summer topwater bite was anything but consistent. On an average day we were able to catch a few smallmouth on top and occasionally had a banner day. When all was said and done there were only a few days that we were shut out on top.

One exceptional day was on August 13 when after a stretch of consistent weather the topwater bite was on. I told my clients that the previous day we had a good topwater bite and with the stable weather it should continue. Our first stop was a weedbed not far from the boat landing. 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.



Caught with Case Plastics



Caught with a 3" Hubs Chub

I told my clients how important it is 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 not only rising smallmouth but 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 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. Often the strike will occur before you get a chance to start your retrieve.

It was a perfect summer morning but I tried not to be too overconfident knowing that nothing is ever a sure thing. I rigged one of my clients with a three inch bone shad Hubs Chub and the other with a three inch crawdad hubs chub. While I always go out of my way to ensue my clients catch fish and not the guide, I felt that it was important that I give them a quick course on how to fish the Hubs chub on the Menominee River. I tossed a three inch bone shad Hubs chub on the edge of the grass let it sit for a few seconds and gave it a few short pops. I repeated the presentation a few more times and retrieved the bait back to the boat. Being unsure

if my advice set in, I made another cast gave the Hubs Chub a few pops and the water exploded. After I landed a chunky 18 inch smallmouth, I put my rod down and told my clients to get to work.

After a few cast and a bit of coaching my clients began popping quality smallmouth with the action continuing throughout the day. We ended up catching 60 smallmouth on top and lost at least that many. It did not matter on the color but the action had to be just right. If they worked the bait to quickly the result was not fish. The vertical drop of the three inch Hubs Chub and a short pause is as deadly as it gets for summer river smallmouth. The next day it rained, the flow of the river changed and the top water bite hit a bulkhead.

If you don't get a response with a topwater bait either due to changes in the river or unstable weather try a soft plastic jerkbait or a stick bait rigged wacky style. One advantage to using a wacky worm is that it will catch river smallmouth in a variety of structures while other presentations might only work around one type of structure. I like to start out in the mornings fishing grass edges and will have my client cast tight to the grass. If the smallmouth are holding in the grass then I will switch to the same stick bait but I will rig it Texas style. After we catch all the smallmouth in the grass we usually cast wacky worms tight to shoreline cover. If smallmouth are holding tight to cover I will have my clients tie on a weedless wacky worm hook. Many times by letting the wacky worm sink it will drop into the deeper wood which will hold the big smallmouth.

Even though a stick bait sinks, many times you will need to add some weight to get the bait down to deep cover. On windy days and in current, a non-weighted stick bait does not sink very well. A few manufacturers make weighted hooks and jigheads for wacky worm fishing but I rely on weighting the stick bait. Since I already rig my wacky worm with an O-ring, I like to add tungsten worm weights to my worm to help it sink. Tungsten weights are heavier but more compact than lead and can be easily inserted into a soft plastic stick bait. The size of the weight depends on the depth of water and current flow. This added weight will cause the worm to fall faster but won't impair the action. A selection of Tungsten weights between 1/64 to 5/64 ounce is good for river smallmouth. Experiment with different weights until you get the proper combination for the day.

Most of the rivers I fish contain stained water. Watermelon red, green pumpkin/gold flake and green pumpkin/copper flake stick baits are my most productive colors. On some days smallmouth will prefer minnow imitation stick baits and that is why I also bring along some white and pearl hologram.

I also fish a lot of mid-river structure in summer that is perfect for the wacky worm. This mid-river structure contains a mix of rock, logs, grass, and most of all, foraging smallmouth. Smallmouth can be sitting at different levels in the water column. Topwater baits can be hot at times but there are many days when the fish just will not rise to hit a bait on the surface. My records show that about 80 percent of the time I can catch smallmouth with a wacky worm so it is definitely my go-to bait. The reason the wacky worm is so effective is its ability to drop to all levels in the water column. So at whatever depth the smallmouth are holding, if they won't rise to strike a bait the wacky worm will find them.

Dragging a tube across humps, rocks, or the river bottom can be a very deadly presentation, since it imitates the movement of a crayfish. When an angler drags a tube, he should also know the habits of the crayfish. For the most part, crayfish will crawl horizontally along the bottom. If you have ever watched crayfish move along the bottom they will exhibit sudden bursts of speed but for the most part they are lethargic as they move along the bottom. A bass will monitor the crayfish movements and go in for the kill when it pauses.

When I drag a tube, I am in the mindset that there is a live crayfish on the end of my line. The only thing that I do differently than most anglers is I don't let the tube sit motionless on the bottom. After I pause the tube, I slowly reel in the slack, and when the line is taught, I raise the rod tip a few inches and slowly drop it back down. What this does is cause the tentacles of the tube to quiver which

resembles the legs of the crayfish. A smallmouth cruising the rocks will find the tube irresistible. Even though most tubes on the market are heavily salted and scented, it never hurts to add a little added scent to your tube. The scent won't attract the smallmouth but it can cause the bass to hang on to the tube longer and increase your rate of hook sets.

Minnow style jerkbaits like my old reliable Case Sinking Minnows and Case Sinking Shads are effective in all types of cover but shine when fished around wood cover and weeds. While soft plastic jerkbaits remain effective when smallmouth are relating to wood cover it is an essential part of my arsenal when fishing mid-river weeds. I rig the Case Sinking Shad with a 4/0 wide gap hook and the smaller Case Sinking Minnow with a 3/0 wide gap hook.

You will have that occasional slow day on the river in summer but they will be few and far between if you follow the techniques that I have laid out. Don't make fishing complicated and you will have lots of fun on the river in summer.



Caught with a 4" Hubs Chub