

# Swimbait Basics For River Smallmouth



One question that many of my clients ask me is, "What is the best smallmouth bass lure?" That is far from an easy question to answer because much depends on the conditions, time of year and the type of water being fished. While some presentations and lures are great at certain times of year or under specific conditions, they fall flat at other times. There is no miracle lure but if anglers learn how to fish soft plastics they can usually catch smallmouth whenever they hit the water. This past year, swimbaits were the bait of choice in my boat.

It is no secret that swimbaits shine in cold water and they catch big smallmouth during the pre-spawn and late fall. However, this past year we put loads of smallmouth in the boat from Early May through November. Even in mid-summer, river smallmouth attack swimbaits. The key is to match the right retrieve and proper swimbait for the conditions. Before we get into the details it is important to get a quick course in swimbait basics.

When fishing swimbaits for smallmouth bass I prefer a six foot-six or seven foot medium or medium/heavy action casting rod. I combine the rod with a low-profile baitcaster with about a 6.3:1 mid-range retrieve speed. If the conditions call for smaller swimbaits I switch to a spinning rod.

Fluorocarbon is the most popular line choice for swimbaits. Use the heaviest you can get away with based on water clarity. Usually, 10-12 pound test will work for mid-sized swimbaits. If you are using larger swimbaits heavier line might be in order. When using a spinning rod with smaller swimbaits eight pound test works best.

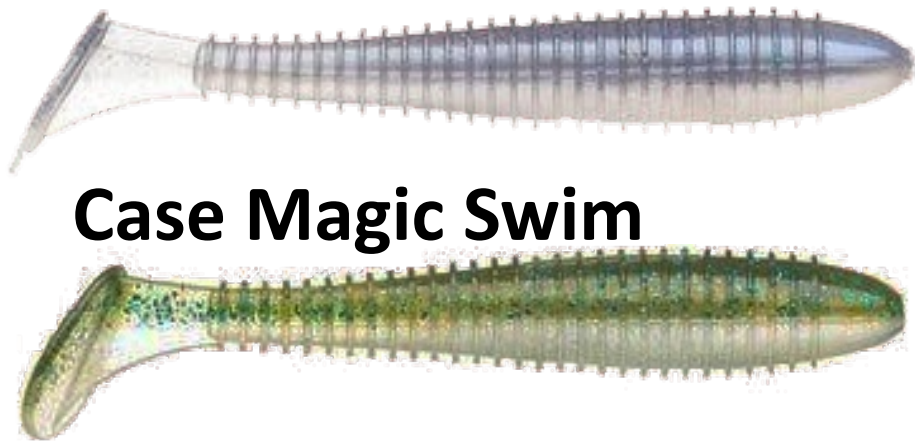
There are a few factors that influence the size of the swimbait. First off, it is important to try to mimic what's naturally available in the system. Additionally, you need to establish the quality of the smallmouth fishery. If you are fishing big fish water throw larger baits, or vice versa. If the bite is tough due to cold water or any tough conditions it is important to downsize. A swimbaits' girth, thickness and resulting profile also should be considered.

Color is important regardless of the clarity of the water you are fishing. Shad and shiner patterns are most popular and will work in both stained and clear water. Semi-translucent swimbaits work great in clear water. A bit of glitter or a little shiny paint adds the effect of scales. Another option is to match bluegill, crappie or perch.

It is important to pay attention to how a swimbait looks when reeled at various speeds. Some baits don't swim well at extremely slow speeds. Others roll or blow out at high speeds. Weight and rigging also affect a swimbaits' action, so if it looks a little funky at first, you might simply need to reduce or increase the weight or try a hook or jighead of a different size. Most ribbed bodied swimbaits with square tails, like the Case Magic Swim, are effective at a variety of speeds and are the best choice for smallmouth.

Mastering a swimbait hookset can take some practice, especially when hooking smallmouth. Smallmouth have a tendency to roll the swimbait in their mouth so you need to wait to set the hook until the line has gone taut. When a fish hits, keep reeling until you feel pressure and watch for the line to move to the side, then use a sweep-set and keep a tight line.

Swim baits are at the top of the list when searching for pre-spawn smallmouth. Spinnerbaits and crankbaits have a place during the pre-spawn, but smallmouth will follow a swimbait longer than either a spinnerbait or a crankbait. It is easier to control the speed and depth of the swimbait opposed to a spinnerbait or crankbait. Fine tuning your retrieve to the desired depth and speed is always important but is most critical during the pre-spawn.



## Case Magic Swim

Most strikes will occur midway in your retrieve but be prepared since a strike can occur at any time. Even though very few strikes will occur at boatside when the water temperature is below 50 degrees, it does happen. Last spring I was fishing on the Menominee River and I caught several smallmouth midway on my retrieve. My concentration was interrupted by an eagle swooping down to grab a small northern pike. As I turned to watch the eagle the water exploded and out of the corner of my eye I watched the big fish of the day swim away. So stay alert!

The myth about swimbaits is that they are not productive for summer smallmouth. While they are not the best choice on natural lakes they are a deadly choice for river smallmouth. This past summer they enabled my clients to enjoy several banner days on the Menominee River. Faced with

rising water levels and scattered smallmouth I had to keep moving.

On a typical early July morning I start out fishing topwater baits over emerging weeds to quickly catch a dozen smallmouth which are feeding on minnows. As the day progresses we move over to rocks to tap into the crawfish bite. One problem was that the weeds were limited and so was the forage.

Faced with rising water levels and scattered forage, it was very complicated with no discernible pattern. We had to keep moving and searching for active smallmouth, which is extremely rare in July. We caught fish, but as I told my clients early one morning, "The smallmouth are here today and gone tomorrow so we will be on the move". We caught a few fish with topwater baits, tubes, wacky worms and soft plastic jerkbaits but there was no pattern. I tied a swimbait on one of my client's rods and he started to consistently catch smallmouth. I gave my other client a swimbait and he also started catching more smallmouth. We finally had a pattern-- keep moving and throw swimbaits! My clients caught smallmouth at the start of the retrieve, midway in the retrieve and at boatside. Swimbaits turned a tough day into an exceptional day on the water as we boated 65 smallmouth.

There is no better search bait than a swimbait but they really shine in the fall. In fall, swimbaits are great when smallmouth are scattered, but when they stack up in late fall it can be like catching fish out of a barrel. One late October day I had a first time client who had never fished swimbaits for smallmouth before. Just before noon I positioned my boat on the edge of a creek channel and he caught 12 smallmouth over 18 inches in 30 minutes with Case Lil Magic Swimbaits. Live bait catches big smallmouth in the fall, but on many days swimbaits are far superior to live bait presentations.