



On The River

River smallmouth are cooperative even under tough conditions. Cold fronts and weather changes can move fish deep on natural lakes and reservoirs. They can be tough to locate and even if you do find fish they can develop a bad case of lock jaw. If the weather change is severe the bite can be tough for several days. On the river the action might slow down a bit but a seasoned angler can usually figure out a pattern. If you have consistent weather, even in the Dog Days of Summer the action can be phenomenal.

I remember one memorable and exceptional summer day when, after a stretch of consistent hot weather, most anglers were having trouble catching bluegill on area lakes let alone smallmouth or walleye. However, on the Menominee River the topwater bite was on big time. I told my clients that the previous day we had 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.



I stressed how important it is to approach the weeds with caution especially if you are looking for big smallmouth. If you approach the weeds too quickly there is a chance you will spook big smallmouth. 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 to score a bull's-eye but you need to be ready for the strike. Make your cast as low to the water as possible since this will eliminate slack in the line. Once the lure hits the water keep a tight line. The strike will often 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 insure 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 casts and a bit of coaching, my clients began popping quality smallmouth with the action continuing throughout the day. We ended up catching 80 smallmouth on top and lost at least that many. It did not matter the color but the action had to be just right. If they worked the bait too quickly the result was no 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 stick bait like a Case Magic Stik 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 rig the Case Magic Stik Texas style. After we catch all the smallmouth in the grass we usually cast wacky worms tight to shoreline cover.



Even though a Case Magic Stik sinks, many times you will need to add some weight to get the bait down to deep cover. On windy days and in current, non-weighted plastics do not sink very well. A few manufacturers make weighted hooks and jigheads for wacky worm fishing but I rely on adding weight directly to a stick bait. After I apply an O-ring on my stick bait with the aid of my O Wacky Tool, I insert a tungsten worm weight in the center of the stick bait 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 and watermelon/gold 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. If you are getting light bites on the Case Magic Stik, try a Case Wacky Jack and hold on tight.

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.