

Menominee River Update



The first week of May started with a few days of stable weather, followed by a horrendous cold front that hit right at the start of the fishing season. Spring cold fronts are nothing out of the ordinary in the Northwoods, and you need to learn how to deal with them. If I was fishing for pleasure it would be no big deal but, being a fishing guide, you have anxious clients anticipating action. Mix in 48 degree water temperature along with high water and you have a tough bite. Having 35 years of guiding experience does ease the stress level a bit, but there is never a sure thing.

I knew that smallmouth would be scattered and that we had to cover water. Swimbaits are the best search bait for scattered early pre-spawn smallmouth. It is no secret that swimbaits shine in cold water and they catch big smallmouth during the pre-spawn. My top producing swimbait in 2018 was the Case Lil Magic Swim.

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 but copolymer line is also effective. I use 15 pound iguana copolymer line which has a diameter of 8 pound test line. The smaller diameter iguana line is super tough and it allows me to fish a swimbait deeper in the water column. When using a spinning rod with smaller swimbaits, eight pound test copolymer usually 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. On the Menominee River the top Case Magic Swim colors are baby bass, albino shad and pearl shiner.

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.

By May 15th the water temperature had inched up into the mid fifties, stable weather was the norm and smallmouth activity exploded. Smallmouth were in the rocky shallows and a combination of topwater baits like the three inch Hubs Chub or a Case Magic stik rigged wacky style did the job. On any given day both presentations caught smallmouth, but usually one presentation out produced the other one.

One mid May day my clients Bill and Ed had a memorable experience. We hit the water about 8 am and headed directly to the rocky shoreline where we had landed several quality smallmouth the previous day. I rigged up Bill with a Case magic stik and Ed with a chartreuse/blue three inch Hubs Chub. Ed made a good cast just inches from the shoreline. The Hubs Chub hit the water and, after a short pop, the water exploded and a behemoth smallmouth leaped out of the water. Fortunately the smallmouth remained hooked and after a few more jumps we eventually landed a trophy 21 inch bronzeback. On his second cast Bill tied into a big smallmouth on the case magic stik. Although the smallmouth did not break water, it put up an incredible scuffle.

Now, any guide will tell you that it is not a good sign when a client catches a big fish on the first cast, let alone two clients catching a big fish back to back. Today however, it was only the start of an unforgettable May day on the Menominee River. We ended up boating about 60 smallmouth bass with several pushing 20 inches, all caught with both Case Magic Stiks and the three inch Hubs Chub.

The fantastic action continued through mid June and, by the fourth of July, the Menominee River smallmouth were in their summer pattern. Although smallmouth were primarily feeding on crayfish they were not focusing entirely on crayfish imitation baits. The topwater bite was excellent all summer. On many days the topwater bite was consistent throughout the day. We caught lots of smallmouth in 2 feet of water at noon under bright sunny conditions. The best topwater day was 75 chunky smallmouth with 12 going over 19 inches.

If the topwater bite fell flat it was hard to beat a Case Wacky Jack. The Case Wacky Jack is designed specifically for fishing wacky style. It is particularly deadly in shallow water where smallmouth are searching for crayfish. Use the 'O-Wacky' tool to slip an "O" ring in the center of the bait and you're ready to fish! This ultra slow sinking bait has a subtle action different from any standard stick-worm on the market. With the tapered ends it flutters through the water column enticing wary fish into biting. The Wacky Jack catches smallmouth when all else seems to fail. On an average summer day on the river, Wacky Jacks will usually produce the big fish of the day.

A case in point was one hot August day when the Case Wacky Jack scored 52 smallmouth for my clients. Early in the day we were catching smallmouth with the three inch Hubs Chub in





bone shad and crawfish. About 10:00 am the topwater bite shut down and they would not hit any other presentation. We went for a short boat ride to a shallow rocky section of the river. We continued to fish topwater baits and soft plastics with no response even though we could see smallmouth feeding in the shallows. Finally, I rigged one of my clients with a watermelon red Case Wacky Jack and the rest was history. The Wacky Jack produced the big fish of the day, a 20.5 inch smallmouth.

Minor cold fronts passed through the northwoods and had a limited effect on the fishing. Seldom are summer cold fronts devastating like in the spring, but smallmouth move to different structure. It pushes smallmouth tight to the bottom or to vertical rock structure. If smallmouth were tight on the bottom, a Case Lil Sweet P or a tube did the job. I rigged the Case Lil Sweet P with a small worm weight and a 3/0 wide gap hook, and crawled it along the bottom with an occasional pause. If the bite is tough a slower retrieve works best. Patience is always the key to success, especially if you are looking for big fish!

A different presentation was needed for smallmouth suspending along the vertical rock ledges. For this situation I choose either a three and one quarter inch Case floating stik

rigged on a mushroom jighead or a 4 inch Zipper Jr worm rigged on a darter head jig. Both presentations are fished in a similar manor by casting parallel to the rocks, letting the bait drop about halfway in the water column and using a slow steady retrieve. Don't pause or jig the bait since after a cold front this will turn off smallmouth. When you feel a bump during your retrieve keep the steady retrieve until you feel the weight of the fish, then set the hook. This presentation will catch smallmouth under the most adverse conditions.

Early September is a transition period as smallmouth switch from primarily feeding on crawfish and switch to minnows. This transition requires both changing your presentation as well as changing your location. Once you understand these changes it can be an extremely productive time to fish on a river. Larger smallmouth are starting to school up and they cruise grass beds, slough edges and creek channels to gorge on schools of shiners and chubs. You might not encounter as large of schools with monster smallmouth like in October, but the weather can be much more pleasant.

This past year this period was especially productive as by early September schools of hungry smallmouth seemed to be everywhere on the Menominee River. Smallmouth were pushing baitfish tight to rocks adjacent to weeds and a Case Lil Magic Swim rigged on a 1/8 or 1/4 ounce jighead was my best search bait. Once we located smallmouth we would switch to a Case sinking minnow or Case sinking shad.

The last few years I have been using a Case sinking minnow rig that has proven especially deadly. First I insert a twist lock centering pin into the nose of the Case sinking minnow. Next I take a barrel swivel and tie on about 30 inches of 8 pound test fluorocarbon line and on the other end tie on a number 4 or number 2 wide bend offset hook. Next slip the hook through the end of the centering pin. You can use an octopus hook but an offset hook results in more hook ups.

Cast the Case Minnow rig, let it sink for 5-10 seconds, then twitch the bait and let it fall. The barrel swivel eliminates line twist and also adds weight. The barrel swivel also allows the case minnow to move side to side in the current, which drives smallmouth wild. If you want the rig to drop deeper in the water column clinch a split shot just above the barrel swivel. This rig is also deadly for pre-spawn and summer smallmouth. For more information or to buy packaged rigs go to my website bigsmallmouthbass.com.



The late fall smallmouth bite came right on schedule. By the third week of September smallmouth started to stack up and were on the feed chasing river shiners and chubs, and we modified our presentations accordingly. A Case sinking minnow or a Case Sinking Shad got the job done. In a three week period my clients boated 21 smallmouth 20 inches or better. Not bad for river smallmouth.

Bill Parson and Don Cook made their annual October trip to the Menominee River from Nashville and, as usual, they were not disappointed. I picked them up at Pops Resort and we headed for the river. After launching, I pointed my boat upstream and Bill and Don knew where I was going, to one of my honey holes. We were soon fishing a mid river ledge with ample shallow water grass and deep rock structure. It did not matter whether we fished the shallow grass or the deeper rocks; the results were the same, big smallmouth! We ended up spending most of the day in that spot since there was no need to move. Finding fish stacked in an area is common in October on the Menominee River.

A few days later I fished with another repeat client and the hot bite continued on the same rock ledge. It's nice to have secret honey holes for my clients. On that particular day, smallmouth were stacked up in the grass and they were crushing a Case Sinking Shad and a

Case Sinking Minnow. We caught a ton of smallmouth that day, ending the day with 25 smallmouth over 19 inches.

For quality river smallmouth it will be hard to beat the Menominee River. Unlike big water and natural lakes, the Menominee River offers wilderness aesthetics, along with an incredible fishery. No long boat rides over rough water, and no jet skis or pleasure boaters; just serenity and big smallmouth. If you are looking for a memorable experience, a day on the Menominee River should be at the top of your bucket list in 2019. [Bigsmallmouthbass.com](http://bigsmallmouthbass.com)

