

2019 in Review

Having logged 38 years of guiding experience, I have learned to be ready for the unexpected and have a few fail safe destinations. After a record snowfall and late ice out it was a tough call when I hit the water in 2019. When the Wisconsin fishing season opened on May fourth the Menominee River was high and the water was cold. Making matters worse, a cold front passed the previous day and the forecast was for brisk northwest winds. I knew that to offer my clients a quality experience I would have to reach into my bag of trips. All I needed to do was to find the warmest available water, shelter from the high winds, and of course, a school of aggressive fish. I told my clients that I had a place that had never failed me in the early season.

Our destination was one of the Menominee River flowages. Smallmouth bass were the primary target, but that particular flowage sports a healthy population of northern pike, walleye and crappie. It also has plenty of shallow stained water which can warm considerably on a sunny day. The sun is your friend when fishing cold water in spring. Water that seems void of fish in the morning can see a transformation by mid day as the water warms a few degrees.

Swimbait is always my first choice when searching for pre-spawn smallmouth but they also are great for northern pike and walleye. My clients tied on Case Lil Magic Swims rigged on 1/8 ounce jigheads. I spooled my baitcaster with 12 pound Seaguar InvizX Fluorocarbon. InvizX is soft, supple and castable with superior sensitivity. It is virtually invisible with advanced hook-setting power. If you prefer a spinning rod, spool your reel with 8 pound InvizX. My choice for a fishing rod is a 6'6 or a seven foot medium action Grandt rod.



We fished points, rocky shorelines, wood and shallow bays picking up isolated smallmouth bass. Although we did not find concentrations of fish, the quality of the fish we caught was excellent. One of my clients caught a chunky smallmouth that measured over 20 inches, and a few more pushing 19 inches.

With the smallmouth action being sporadic I suggested that since the water had warmed four degrees since we started fishing it was time to move into the shallows. It was a good move as we spent the rest of the day catching northern pike, walleye, largemouth bass, and crappie along with a few more smallmouth. While we did not break any records we ended up with a mixed bag and an enjoyable day on the water. Not a bad way to start the 2019 season. Again, my hotspot did not fail me. If the wind would have subsided a bit the water would have warmed faster, and we would have had a banner day. Just imagine how great the action would have been that day under good conditions.

A few days later I met my clients at Popp's Resort and headed out on High Falls Flowage for a combination smallmouth and walleye trip. Typical of early May we were hit with another cold front, and with the water temperature a cold 51 and walleyes in the post-spawn it would be a tough bite. The good news was that the forecast called for sunny skies and light winds which would raise the water temperature during the day and activate smallmouth bass.

After launching the boat we headed for the north end of the flowage and I positioned my boat on the edge of a rock ledge that dropped from seven feet to 16 feet. Post-spawn walleyes were stacked up like cordwood tight to the bottom but, as expected, the bite was tough. 1/8th ounce leadhead jigs tipped

with a fathead minnow triggered a few bites and we boated a few walleyes over 15 inches along with several smaller ones. Things were looking good but the walleyes got lockjaw and we made a move to a shoreline point. We marked plenty of fish on the locator but only managed one legal sized walleye.

By 10:00 am the water temperature warmed to 55 degrees and it was smallmouth time. I rigged my clients' rods up with Case Lil Magic Swimbait and it did not take long to find active fish. We continued to fish points and rocky shorelines, ending the day with 27 smallmouth and four hitting the 20 inch mark. All of the smallmouth were caught with Case Lil Magic swims. We never gave it a thought to try another lure.

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.

Mark Follett has fished with me for over 25 years and he prefers to fish for smallmouth bass with a fly rod. During both the pre-spawn and post-spawn this can be a deadly presentation, especially on stained water flowages. On May 28th we fished one of the flowages on the Menominee River. Smallmouth were still in the pre-spawn and were staging in 6-10 feet of water and holding tight to cover, not an ideal situation for a fly fisherman. If I was fishing soft plastics I would rig up a tube or a Case Magic Stick rigged weedless on a 3/0 wide gap hook and crawl the plastics tight to cover. Since we were fishing with a fly rod I opted to fish the shallow water searching for active smallmouth.

We started fishing a series of islands and Mark caught a few smaller bass but the smallmouth were scattered. By mid day the water temperature was 57 degrees and the bigger fish were on the move. After a bit of searching I deployed the trolling motor and eased into a shallow bay with an adjacent rock outcropping. It did not take long for Mark to connect with a dandy smallmouth well over 20 inches. With the smallmouth holding deep and tight to cover, catching smallmouth with a fly rod was not easy that day. Although we did not pile up numbers we did boat some quality smallmouth.

There is always a good topwater bite on the Menominee River. Some years if conditions are right, my clients catch smallmouth with topwater baits from spring through early fall. During other years there is a specific window for the topwater bite. Weather and water levels are the prime factors in determining the topwater bite. Fishing with topwater is never a sure thing but it is my preferred method for catching smallmouth bass, while at the same time not being necessarily the most productive.





In 2019 from mid-June through late July the topwater bite was awesome and predictable on the Menominee River. The topwater bite excelled under stable weather and even stayed consistent during moderate cold fronts. The river levels dropped a bit but they were still slightly above normal, and after spawning was completed the smallmouth stacked up in shoreline cover. After spawning, smallmouth were holding tight to shoreline cover and did not want to move out from the cover into the current. This situation is prime for a properly placed topwater bait.

The secret is to keep the topwater bait in the strike zone in order to trigger a strike. Many anglers make the mistake of pulling the topwater bait away from the shoreline. Prop baits with a vertical drop like the Hubs Chub or a Whopper Plopper excel in this situation. Give the topwater bait a couple of fast pops and then let the rear of the bait drop. Wait a few seconds then pop the bait again. If you fail to get a strike make another cast.

In late June we had one of those days where we could not do anything wrong. We started out casting topwater baits tightly to the shoreline and one of my clients, who was more experienced, made his cast spot on and started pounding smallmouth. The other guy was having more trouble finding the strike zone. I suggested that he cast off the other side of the boat hoping to ease his frustration. On his second cast a 19 inch smallmouth hammered his Hubs Chub. It was a perfect day, we caught smallmouth tight to the shoreline, over grass, and over mid river structure.

Another memorable day in mid July was with first time client John Gillen. John caught about a dozen smallmouth on a prop bait and all but one of them were between 18-21 inches. We caught some tight to the shoreline but the smallmouth hit at various places in the retrieve. Now that is world class

topwater fishing in anyone's book!

A week later the Menominee River dropped a bit and smallmouth gradually moved off the shorelines and started searching mid river structure for food. This is a typical summer river pattern. Smallmouth were still hitting topwater baits as they roamed mid river rocks. If they did not hit topwater baits we caught them on Case Sinking Slated Minnows and Case Magic Stiks rigged wacky style. When fishing soft plastics my clients use one of my Jim Grant 6' 6" medium light action spinning rods spooled with 8 pound Seaguar InvizX Fluorocarbon.

Still another hot bait on the Menominee River this past summer was the 3.5 inch Case Jacks Worm.

The Jacks Worm has a spiked tail design that quivers in the water under the slightest movement and drives smallmouth wild. I rig the Jacks Worm up with a 3/0 wide gap hook and a 1/8 or 1/4 bullet weight. I slowly drag the Jacks worm along the bottom and give it an occasional pause. On the pause the spiked tail quivers and triggers vicious strikes from smallmouth. The more you pause the Jacks Worm the more strikes you get. Another tip is to twitch the Jacks worm aggressively and then let it drop to the bottom and hold on!

I was really pumped as we moved into August, which historically has a consistent topwater bite due to the usual consistent weather patterns and low river levels. However, we did not experience consistent weather and the river started to rise. This caused the topwater bite to fizzle as smallmouth scattered with some of them heading to deeper structure. My clients were ready to fish topwater baits but we had to switch tactics. We had to keep on the move, fish different types of structure and cover the entire water column.

It was swimbait time again. I will occasionally use swimbaits in summer when smallmouth are scattered and this August they were a game changer. We experienced several passing fronts and due to the lighter bite we switched to smaller and slimmer 3" swimbaits on 1/16 ounce and 1/8 ounce jigheads. It was a learning curve each day since we had to vary our retrieve until we got it right.

By late August and early September I moved away from my typical river hotspots and concentrated downstream on the flowages where I found a higher concentration of smallmouth. Smallmouth were relating to both weedlines and shoreline wood and feeding on minnows. The minnow bite signaled that it was time to switch over to minnow imitation baits like the Case Sinking Salted Shad and Case Sinking Salted Minnow. Suspending jerkbaits are another option especially when the water temperature starts to drop.

The third week of September, smallmouth started to stack up and the action was consistent for a few weeks. As we moved into October, wet unstable weather, high winds, and increased flow on the Menominee River pushed smallmouth into deep water. The unstable wet weather locked in for most of the month making for some tough conditions. The late fall action was sporadic as we found loads of smallmouth one day while the next day was tough. The good news is that we caught quality smallmouth every day that we fished on the Menominee River.



The walleye fishing on the Menominee River was excellent even though I spent very little time actually fishing for them. We caught them on a variety of soft plastics and minnows while fishing for smallmouth bass. Besides numbers of walleye, my clients boated walleyes up to 29 inches. With increased population due to stockings I might even have to take some guide trips for walleye in spring and fall.

Over on High Falls and Caldron Falls flowages the musky fishing was good, and the crazy weather had the reverse effect than it had on the Menominee River. Every guide trip on High Falls Flowage produced at least one muskie. The 50 inch size limit and past stockings on both flowages are having an impact, and the future looks great.

Nothing was normal in 2019, but by adapting to the conditions we enjoyed good fishing. One thing is for sure; regardless of the conditions in 2020, I will be on the water and catching fish!