

Ice Out River Smallmouth

Early season smallmouth bass fishing can be challenging on rivers. No two years are the same. This depends both on the prevailing weather and river conditions. Even if you do figure out a pattern things can change rapidly, so you need to be able to adapt. Due to river conditions, spawning can take place in different areas from year to year. Pre-spawn smallmouth on natural lakes are much more predictable. They will spawn in the same areas every year and pre-spawn smallmouth stage in the same area. You still need to adjust to the water temperature and weather but finding a pattern is easier.

Historically, most rivers in the upper Midwest experience high water in spring. High water can be a good thing because it pushes smallmouth out of their deep-water wintering areas and into the shallows. Even though actual spawning occurs in rock and gravel areas, smallmouth move into shallow backwaters containing a combination of sand, muck and wood. Besides finding warmer water smallmouth will find a variety of minnows. Regardless of your geographical location spring smallmouth bass activity is dependent on water temperature.

In Northern Wisconsin we deal with hard water and we are unable to launch a boat until late April. The Menominee River can take a long time to warm up due to the snow melt. Most of the creeks that flow into the Menominee River are classic brook trout streams, so even once the snowpack melts the water is not quick to warm up. Typically, I do not pursue smallmouth bass until the water temperature breaks 40 degrees, unless I have a guide trip booked. If smallmouth have lockjaw on these early season guide trips I offer my clients the option of fishing for northern pike.

Being I guide, I did have to figure out a few patterns to catch cold water smallmouth. As the water temperature rises smallmouth gravitate to the actual spawning area. After ice out if the water is low, smallmouth will remain in deeper water and can remain lethargic until the water warms. My success with river smallmouth has been unpredictable when the water temperature is below 40 degrees. There is the occasional productive day but many times fishing can be frustrating. Tubes and finesse jigs are good presentations but a leadhead jig and a minnow is deadly in cold water. While guiding for walleyes my clients often catch big smallmouth mixed in with walleyes. I have had many days when a 1/16-ounce leadhead jig with a fathead minnow and utilization of a few walleye techniques has scored many a 20-inch plus smallmouth. Each spring I watch walleye fisherman landing trophy class smallmouth when bass anglers can't get a strike. The conclusion is when the water temperature is under 40 degrees catching smallmouth on rivers is never a sure thing, but live bait will put the odds in your favor.

Once the water temperature reaches the upper 40's river smallmouth start to show signs of activity and the bite becomes predictable. However, there is no magic temperature and smallmouth activity has more to do with prevailing weather and river conditions. Stable weather and stable river conditions point to good fishing and drastic changes in the river and the weather makes for tough fishing.

While every river is different, smallmouth relate to the same type of structure. In cold water smallmouth try to avoid the current as much as possible. This can mean fishing slack water on the downstream side of islands, sheltered shorelines where there is a distinct current break, sloughs backwaters, sandbars, and midriver structure. This might seem overwhelming but to catch cold water spring smallmouth you need to touch all the basses.

As the water temperature climbs into the mid-fifties the pre-spawn smallmouth bite is in full swing. However, I live in northern Wisconsin and spring cold fronts are more common than I would like. I have seen a phenomenal bite come to a screeching halt. A cold front can drop the water temperature and slow down the bite. Spring cold fronts usually are accompanied by high winds that can last a few days. Unfortunately, a fishing guide cannot control the weather and one needs to figure out a pattern. But you also need to figure out how to produce fish for your clients.

Transition areas can be prime staging areas for big pre-spawn females and are often passed up by river anglers. A transition is a distinct change from a hard to soft bottom. As water temperatures rise during the day females will start to roam the shallows out of the current and continue doing so until the sun starts to wane, causing the water temperature to reverse its procedure. Once the water temperature drops only a few degrees the female smallmouth begin to move. As they move out of the shallows, they will often stack up along the first transition from soft to hard bottom.

Big smallmouth will hold tightly to the steep rock transitions overnight and remain there the next day until the water temperature repeats its procedure. Even if the transition is not present smallmouth will use steep rock banks as migration routes from deep to shallow water. Most anglers will launch their boat and head into the shallows and pass up the honey hole. The smart angler will stop at the transition, cast a suspending jerkbait, soft plastic jerkbait, grub, jig and minnow or a crankbait and start the day with a few big smallmouth.

Do not make the mistake of passing up the transition in the morning and heading for the shallows. You might catch a few small males while fishing the shallows and you might even have some fun, but if the water temperature drops overnight the big fish will not be there. If you wait to fish the transition until late morning you will also find a lack of big fish. As the day progresses and the water temperature rises a few degrees the temperature will trigger smallmouth to head back towards the shallows. This might not be a quick movement and the fish will spread out and be tough to locate, making for tough fishing.

