

Pre Spawn Smallmouth



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.

Vertical jigging with a leadhead jig and grub is a presentation that I have used successfully when smallmouth have lockjaw after a cold front. After a cold front, some smallmouth will stack up in a hole to avoid the current and refuse to move vertically or horizontally. The size of the leadhead is important and depends on the current and depth of the water. Once you locate the fish with your electronics, position your boat with the bow of the boat into the current. With spot lock on your trolling motor this can be easily done. Next, drop your jig rigged with a small 3-inch grub and let it sit on the bottom a few seconds. Twitch your wrist raising the grub about 6-8 inches and let the jig drop. Wait a few seconds to allow the jig to hit bottom and repeat. This sharp twitch and pause will trigger strikes. A slower rise and drop presentation is less effective. You need to make bottom contact. Use a six foot six, medium action Grandt Rod and spool your reel with 8-pound Fluorocarbon line. Fluorocarbon line is superior for this presentation than mono or braid since it responds quicker to the twitch and helps the jig. In the old days all we had was monofilament line and while it did work fine, I had nothing with which to compare it.

Most anglers associate hair jigs with clear water smallmouth but they can be very deadly for river smallmouth in the right situation and are tailor made for smallmouth holding tightly to wood cover. I figured this out years back when guiding fly fisherman. My approach to fishing is to keep your options open and learn. On many occasions over the years fly fisherman had success on days when I knew fishing with soft plastics or hard baits would be tough. It did not take much to convince me to incorporate hair into my arsenal. Hair seems to excel in areas where you can find shelter from the wind and the wood cover is not extremely dense.

Fishing hair jigs requires patience in snag infested rivers but it is worth the effort. Due to the patience needed and recurrence of snags, I seldom use hair jigs while guiding. I do use hair jigs while guiding on clear water lakes where precise casting is not essential, and snags are seldom a problem. However, I have been using them for years when fishing alone and have caught many quality smallmouth.

I use hair jigs when fishing around rocks and submerged stumps. When fishing around rocks I use a 1/16-ounce or 1/8-ounce jig with a slow retrieve and an occasional twitch or lift and let it fall. Most strikes will occur on the fall. The strike will usually be subtle so stay alert since it will take time for the finicky smallmouth to suck in the hair jig.

As far as jig colors, for years I relied primarily on minnow patterns and would occasionally cast a crayfish pattern. One day we were catching smallmouth in the stumps using soft plastic jerkbaits when my client asked me if hair jigs would work. I replied that they would work but that this was snag infested water. He said that he tied his own jigs and had brought along lots of them. He tied on a 1/16-ounce black jig with a streak of purple saying this was his favorite color on a clear water lake that he fishes. It took a few casts but he eventually caught a dandy smallmouth and proceeded to catch several more. Since that day I tend to be more open to experimenting with different colors.

The same technique will work around stumps, but snags are a problem. Another problem is that smallmouth can hold tight to stumps and refuse to move away from them, especially during tough weather conditions. I have had my best success using a float and fly rig with a few modifications for shallow stained water.

Swimbait are effective after a cold front even if the water temperature does not rise. I have had countless days when we had to deal with cold front conditions including high winds and overcast skies. These conditions will push smallmouth tight to the bottom and they can refuse to move. If this is the situation, try to keep the swimbait as close to the bottom as possible. Use a slow retrieve just fast enough to keep the paddle tail moving. Try not to pause the retrieve. Smallmouth can follow the swimbait and if you pause your retrieve they will turn and move away. You will also have a good chance of getting snagged.

There is no one size fits all when fishing with swimbait. It is a good practice to downsize your swimbait under tough conditions from the start. Why waste time using a larger swimbait when you know that the bite is tough? After a cold front I will start out fishing with a shorter, slender paddle tail. Although you are using a shorter swimbait continue to use a longer shank on your jighead. When smallmouth are sluggish it will take a few more seconds to roll the swimbait and the longer shank hook on the jighead will result in more hook ups.

Swim jigs should also be a part of every river anglers arsenal. I never spent much time experimenting with swimbait until one of my clients pulled one out when we had a tough day. We were fishing in a river backwater loaded with fallen trees and stumps. It was one of those days where we caught an occasional smallmouth on a different lure but could not put together a pattern. My client asked me if a swim jig would work. I told him to try a swim jig that resembled a minnow pattern. He tried on a white swim jig and a silver curly tail grub trailer and after a few cast he caught a 19-inch smallmouth. A few casts later he caught another smallmouth. That was the first two smallmouth that we caught on the same lure that day. I told my client, "Maybe we have a pattern." It was indeed a pattern and we caught 15 smallmouth on swim jigs in that backwater. I have been using swim jigs for river smallmouth ever since.

When are swim jigs more effective than swimbait? Swim jigs are effective when smallmouth are tight to cover but they also allow you to cover water. The skirt on the swim jig adds movement and bulk compared to a swimbait. It looks like it's alive in the water. Under most situations in a river, you are fishing water from three to five feet and I like to fish the swimbait from 1-3 feet below the surface.

