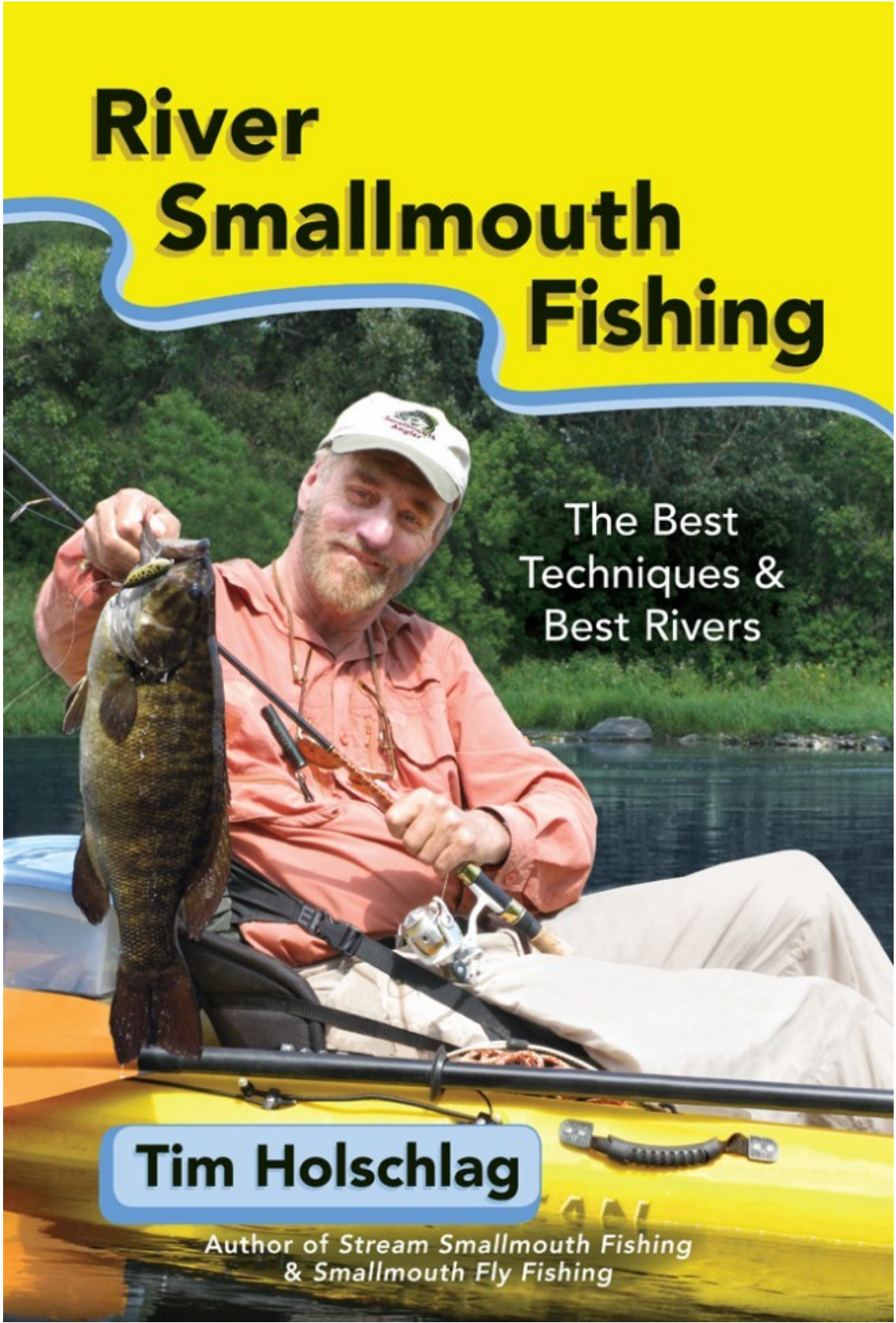


River Smallmouth Fishing

The Best
Techniques &
Best Rivers

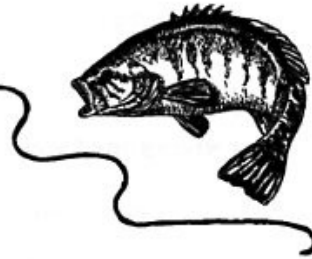
Tim Holschlag

*Author of Stream Smallmouth Fishing
& Smallmouth Fly Fishing*



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Special Section: Scenes of River Smallmouthing**Part II****Best Rivers for Smallmouth**

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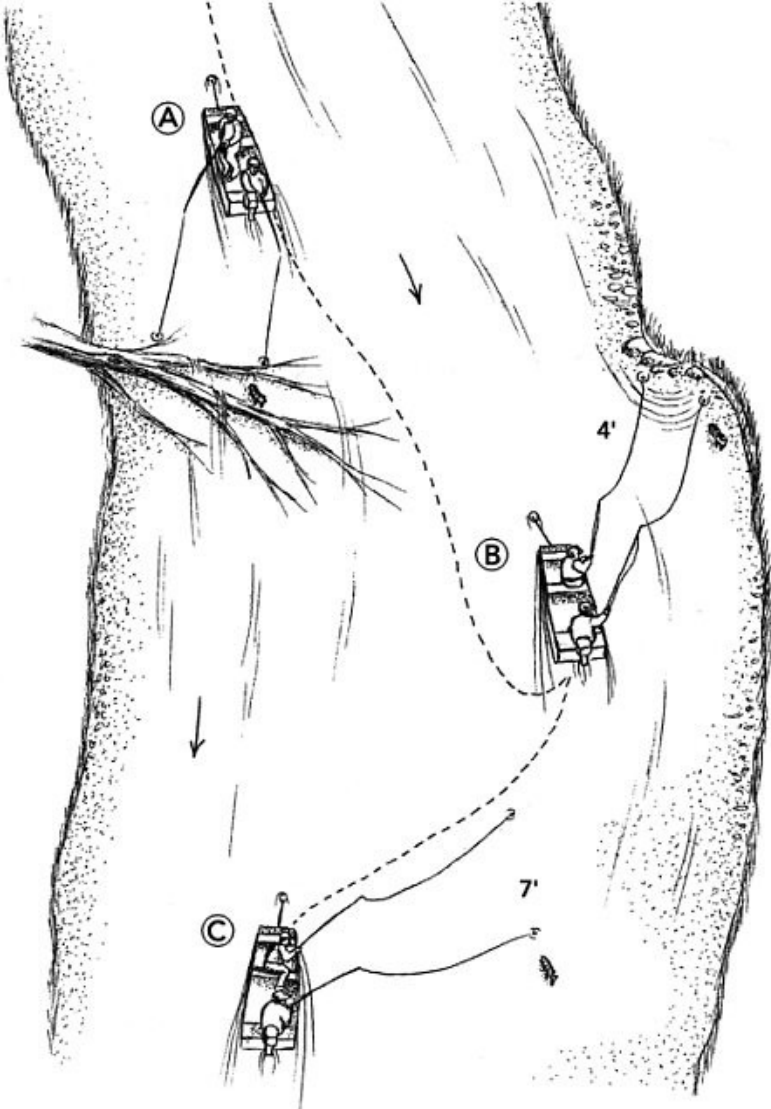
Publisher's Photo Note

River Smallmouth Fishing is graced with several dozen full- and half-page color photos. Many fishing how-to book publishers aren't willing spend the extra money on this much color, but Tim Holschlag wouldn't have it any other way. Tim has spent his entire life around smallmouth and has always appreciated the great beauty of their waters and unique enjoyment of the sport. He very much wants to share this with others and hopes these photos will offer readers a glimpse into the extraordinary world of river smallmouth angling.

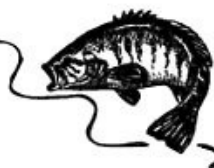


Big fish and great scenery are just a couple of reasons to love river smallmouthing.

ANCHORING



These fishermen carefully set anchor to be in the best places to cast from—upstream of the log jam (A), beside the bank eddy (B) and slightly downstream of the deepest part of the pool (C).



THE FIVE FISHING BOAT ESSENTIALS

To fish effectively from a boat, it must be designed and rigged for five essential things:

1. PROPULSION AND CONTROL

Oars, paddles, gas or electric motor—whatever propulsion you choose should get your boat easily through or around riffles, rapids, rocks and downed trees. And if you intend to fish from the boat, you must also be able maneuver, position and control the watercraft for accurate casting.

2. ANCHOR SYSTEM

Quick, easy anchoring is essential for effective fishing. The best systems have both a bow and a stern anchor, each operable from your fishing position and convenient enough to use dozens of times in a day.

3. CASTING EASE

For bank shooting or anchored fishing, you need a stable sitting or standing position from which you can easily cast out the front and both sides of the craft.

4. ROD STORAGE

Your craft should have an out-of-the-way, yet convenient, place to store a rod (or rods) when not in use, and protect rods from breakage.

5. GEAR STORAGE

You need dry, yet accessible, places to put your extra lures/flies and tackle, plus rainwear, camera, clothing, lunch, and everything you need for a day on the water.

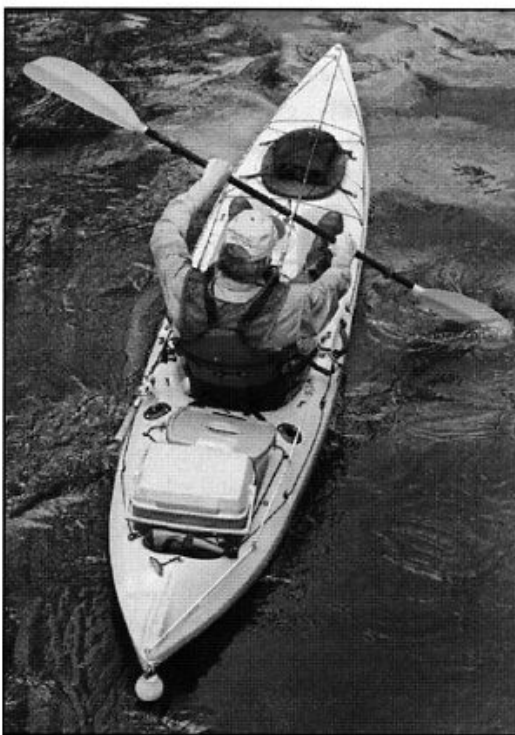
Kayak Modifications

I know of no kayaks marketed as “angler” models that are truly ready to fish from when you buy them. First of all, many fishing kayaks don't have very good seats. While some kayaks come with nice padded seats with adjustable back rests, on other models you'll need to make your own seating improvements. On one of my sit-on-tops, I add a soft camp chair over the factory seat for extra comfort and better back support.

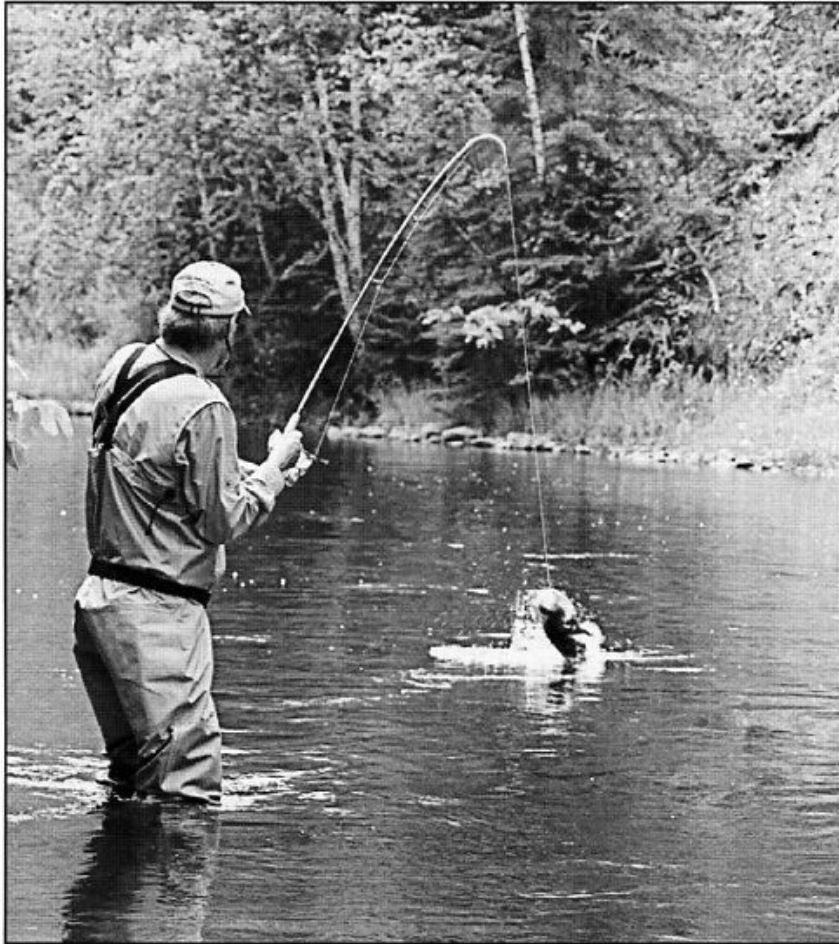
Another essential item is a good anchor system, which virtually no kayaks come with from the store. I rig my own, by using a 4-pound ball-head anchor that hangs directly off the stern. The anchor rope runs through a rear eye bolt, then through two pulleys to a cleat or jam, where I can secure the rope at any length I want. And just like on my canoes, this nifty anchor can be quickly and easily raised and lowered dozens of times a day.

A fishing kayak also needs an easy-to-use paddle holder. (Just letting the paddle lay across your lap while you try to land a big smallie is a recipe for a lost fish and lost paddle.) On some models you can secure your paddle under the existing deck bungee cords, but on other models it's better to install a plastic paddle clip to hold the paddle along the side of the boat, out of your way. I also use a “paddle leash,” a stretchy cord with one end tied around the paddle shaft and the other clipped to the boat, so that I won't lose my paddle if I accidentally let go of it.

You also need a secure place to put your fishing rod while paddling, and a place to store an extra rod. One possibility is the flag-pole-type rod holders that many manufacturers sell. They work okay if you're careful. But I'm not a big fan of that



This sit-on-top kayak has a quick and easy stern anchor, essential for effective kayak fishing.

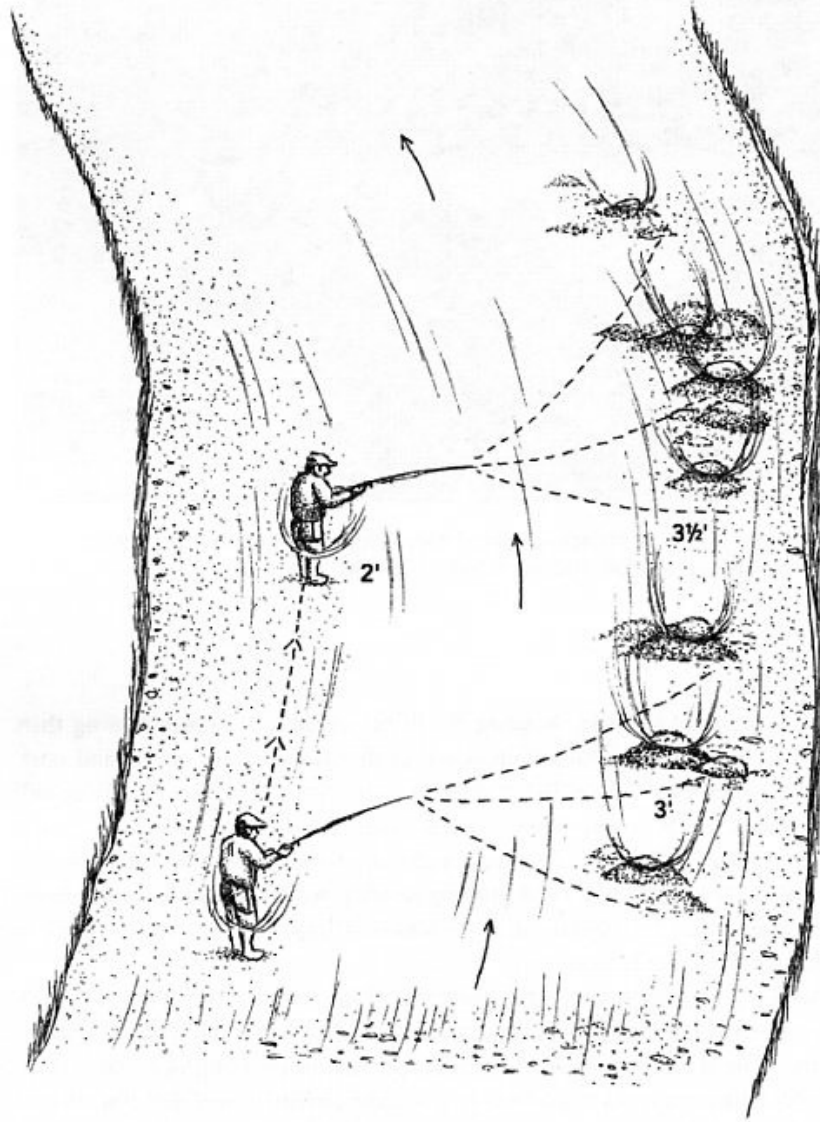


Wading puts you right in the fish's environment. A 17-incher jumping so close it splashes you thrills even the most jaded fisherman.

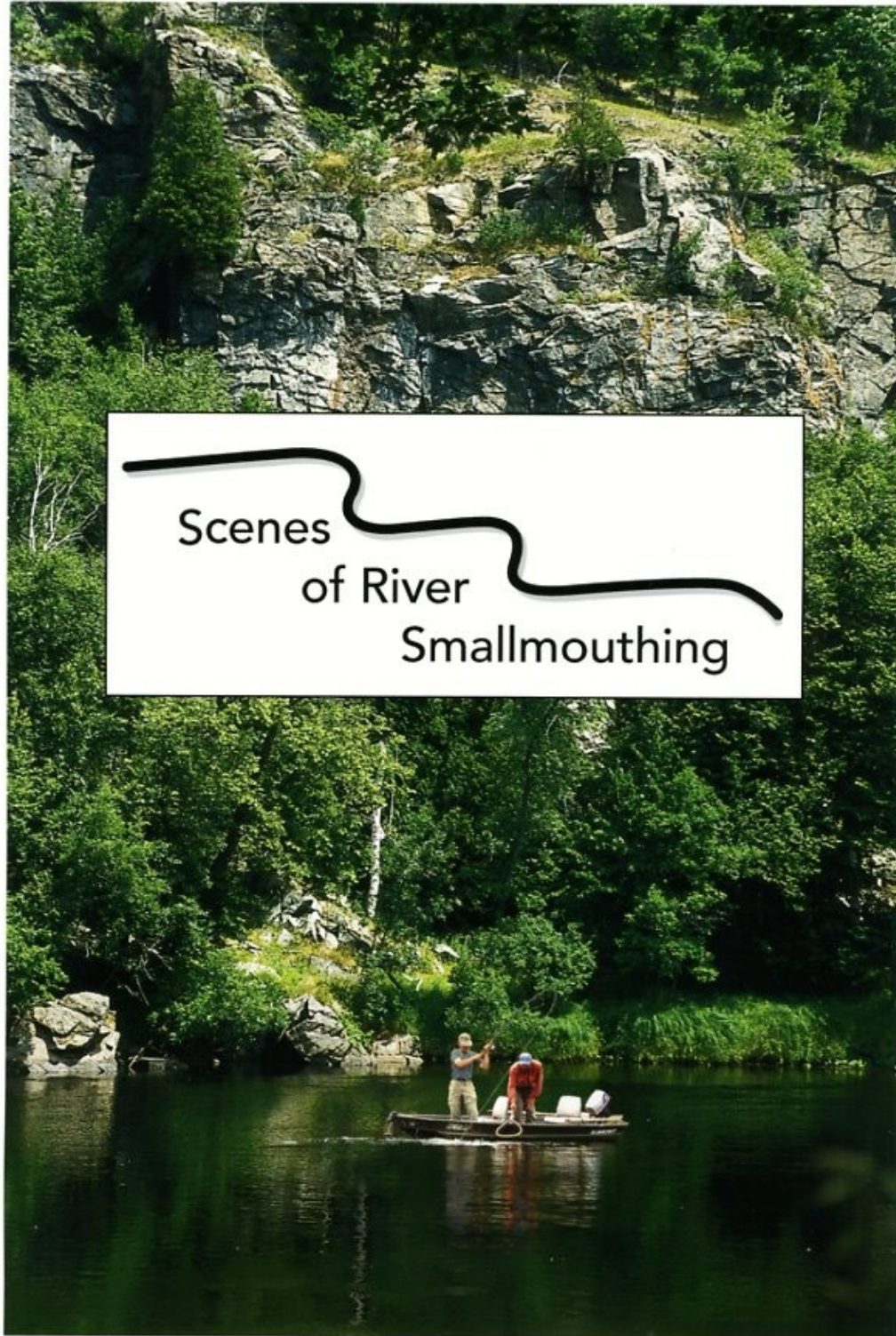
When fish are acting extra-finicky, sluggish or shy, a with-the-current retrieve can give you an extra edge. Retrieving with the current also enables a lure to dig deeper than with an against-the-current retrieve. Staying near bottom is often the ticket to coaxing a bite.

Now let's look at a few situations where a downstream approach is best. Just remember, every stretch of stream is a little different from others. The situations described are intended to give you a *general* sense of how to work different types of water.

FISHING A RUN

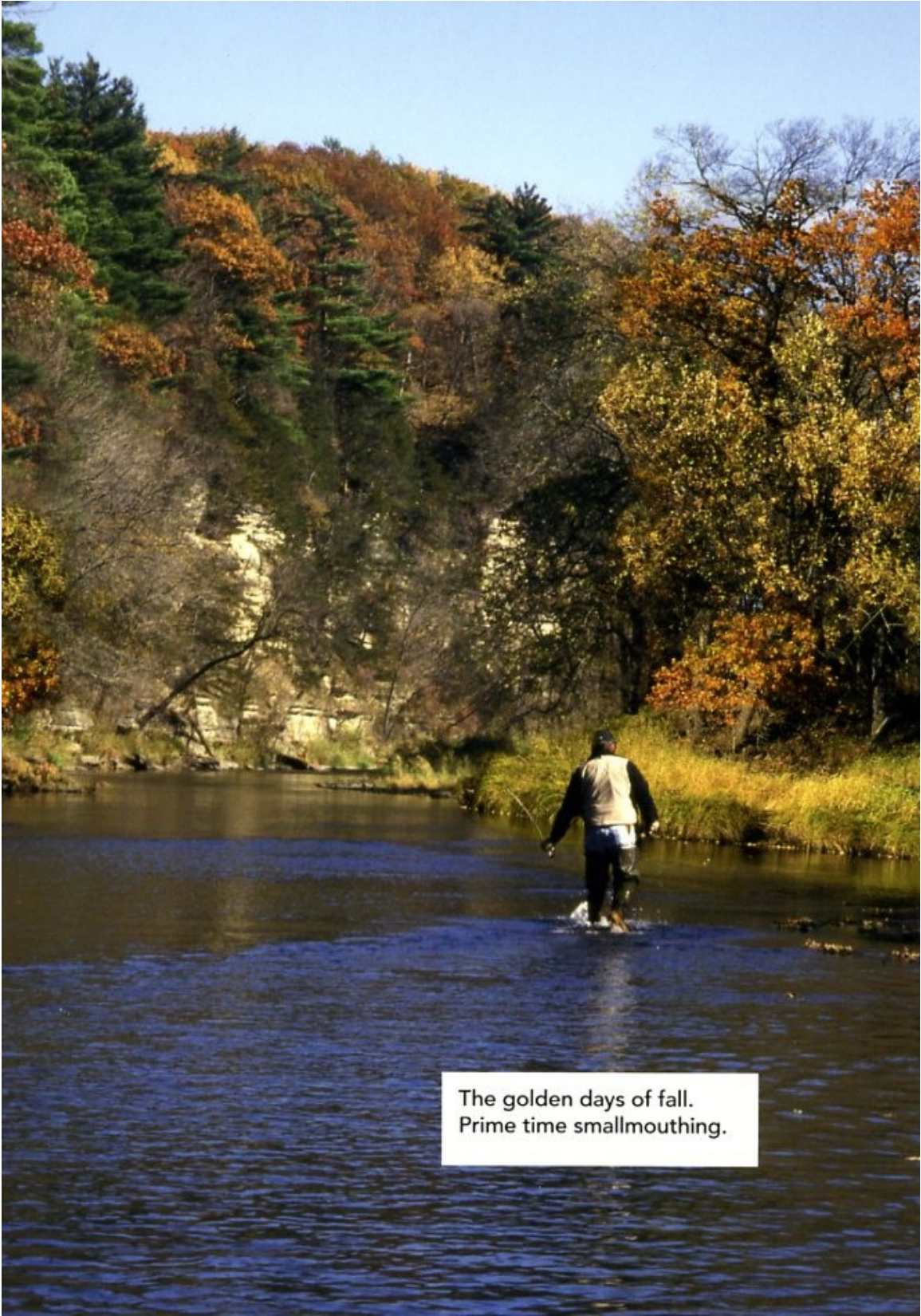


To fish a run, the angler starts upstream on the shallow-water side, then carefully works his way downstream. Using the Minnow Swing (across-and-downstream casts) the angler targets both above-water and subsurface boulders on the deep-water side.



Scenes
of River
Smallmouthing

Some smallmouth rivers are downright spectacular.



The golden days of fall.
Prime time smallmouthing.



Five pounds of wow!



A sunny day and the Float 'n' Fly.
A good combo in the late season.



"Walking the horse." Sometimes getting out and leading a small craft
through a shallow rapids is the wise choice.



A sit-inside kayak may be a little harder to get out of, but offers a drier ride.



Brian Younger loves the park-and-wade method for obvious reasons.



Jumping bronze on a quiet stream. What else is there to say?



Pontoons offer excellent stability.



Ozark streams are beautiful and productive.



Twenty-inchers are true treasures of the piscine world. Treat them with care.



Park-and-wade on a small scenic stream.

Topwater Advantages

Snag-Free

Besides producing heart-stopping excitement, surface fishing has some distinct advantages. In many shallow rivers, getting continuously hung on the bottom is a big problem. In some particularly snaggy environments using almost any subsurface lure is pure frustration. Topwaters eliminate this major hassle.

Surface Strikes

Strike detection is also a critical issue when river fishing. Was that bump a rock, a weed or a fish? Fishing subsurface, it's often tough to tell. But when you stay on top there is no doubt when you've got a strike.

Search Baits

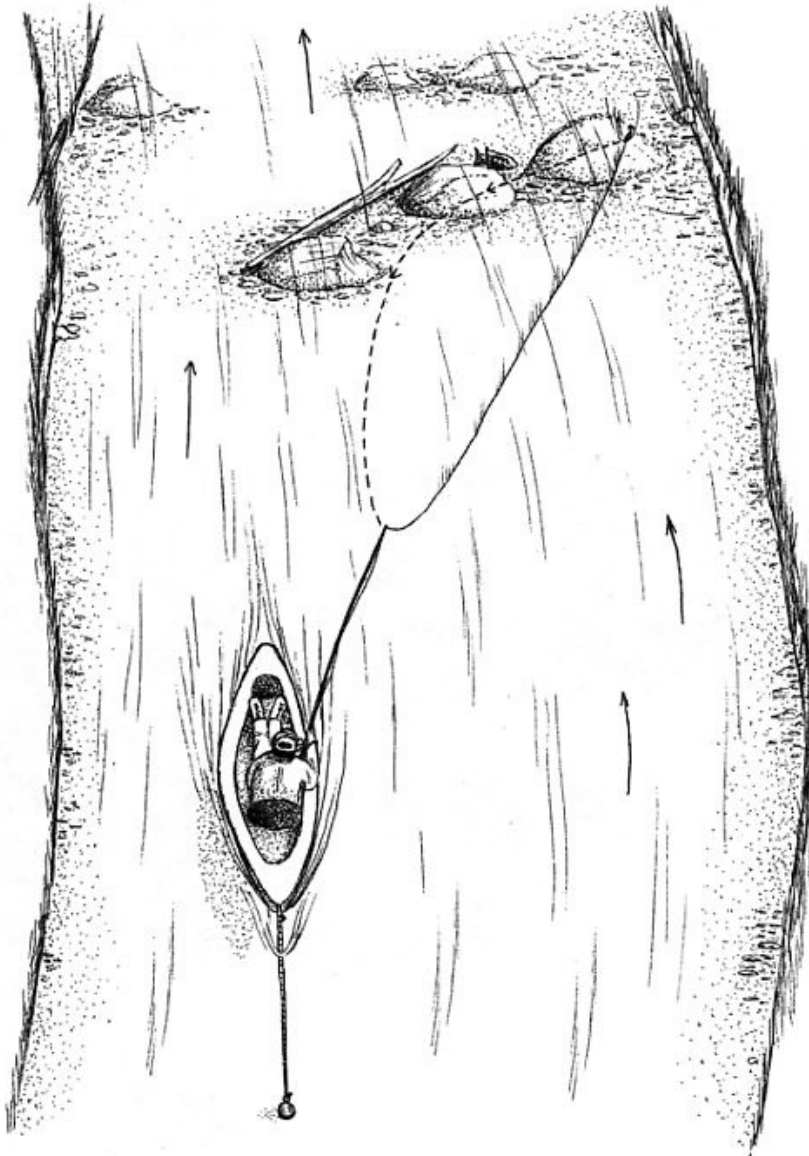
Another big topwater advantage is the ability to quickly cover large amounts of water. Fast-moving lures, like buzzbaits, stickbaits and even prop topwaters, are great search baits and can skim across a pool faster than nearly any subsurface lure. Where smallies exist in low densities and/or they are in a very active mode, being able to cover a lot of water is a valuable asset. In these situations the amount of water you cover in a day often equates to the number of fish you catch.

Topwaters also really shine for trying new water. I do a lot of exploring, including on streams where I may know only a little about the smallmouth populations. Surface fishing is my favorite way to make "first contact" on these little-known waters. As I move downstream, I can quickly work the surface ahead of me with a fast-moving topwater. When I do contact fish, I can then slow down and work that area more thoroughly with a subsurface offering. Very effective!

Target Baits

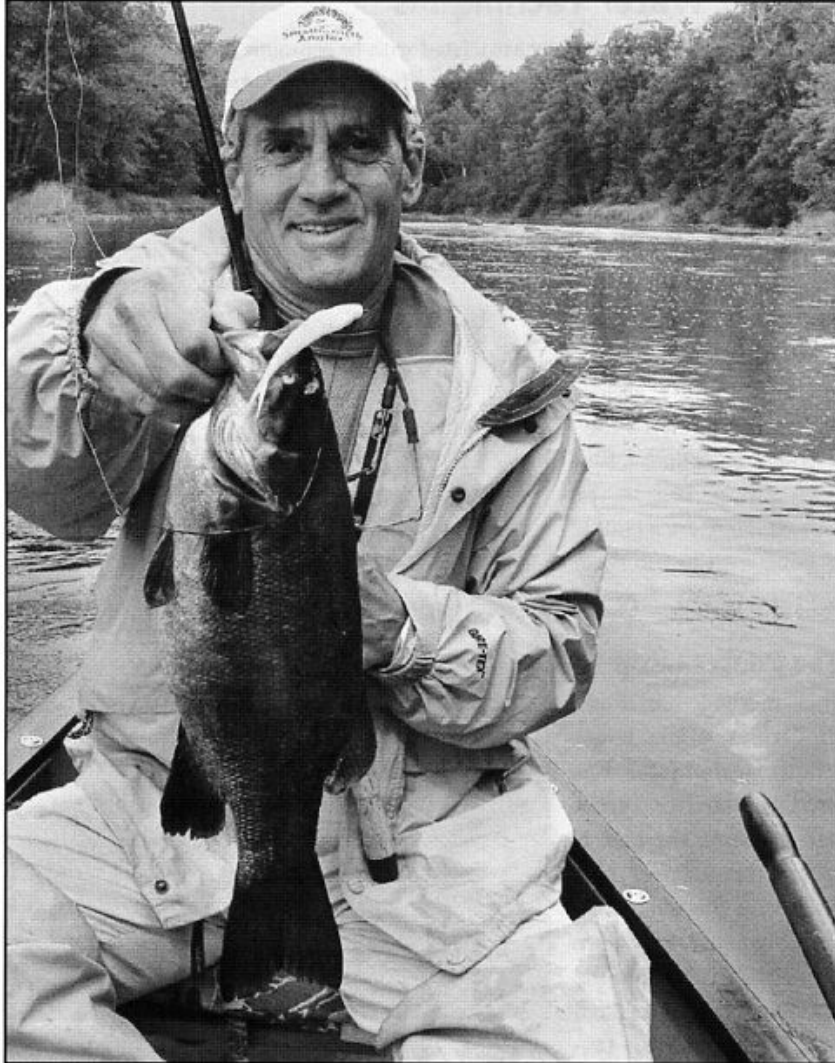
Conversely, topwaters are often excellent as target lures. A downed tree, a ripped bank, the edge of a weed patch, a mid-stream boulder—specific spots like these scream "smallmouth," and targeting them with slow-moving topwaters is often the perfect way to generate strikes. Just make sure your first two casts are your best ones. On many days, the first couple casts to a spot will account for 85% to 90% of all your strikes. So make them accurate, and make your retrieve the best one possible.

BOULDER BUZZBAITING

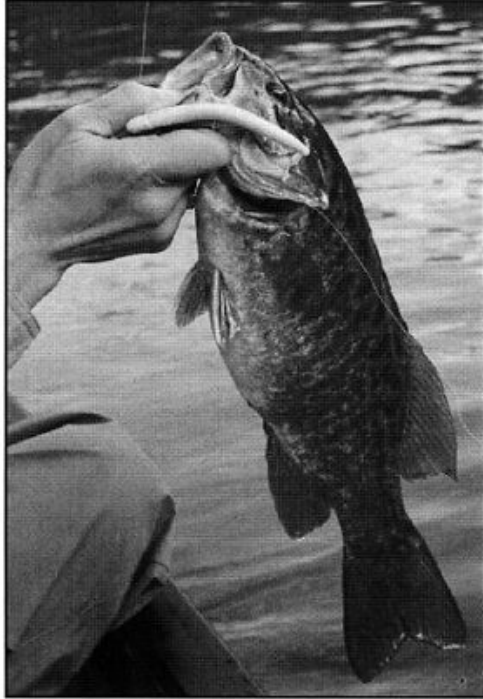


When working a buzzbait, cast first to the boulders farthest down and across stream, so the current will help the lure swing past other boulders on the same retrieve.

four or five smallies from one spot before the bite tapers off. If the water is at least 4 feet deep and not overly clear, even working the lure barely 10 feet downstream of the boat is effective. And sometimes twitching the lure in place for what seems like an eternity is the ticket. Long after you're convinced there are no fish around—BAM, a big boy nails it. I've had 20-inchers do this. It wakes you up quick.



Twitching a fluke "In-Their-Face" against the flow was the right technique on this river in early fall.



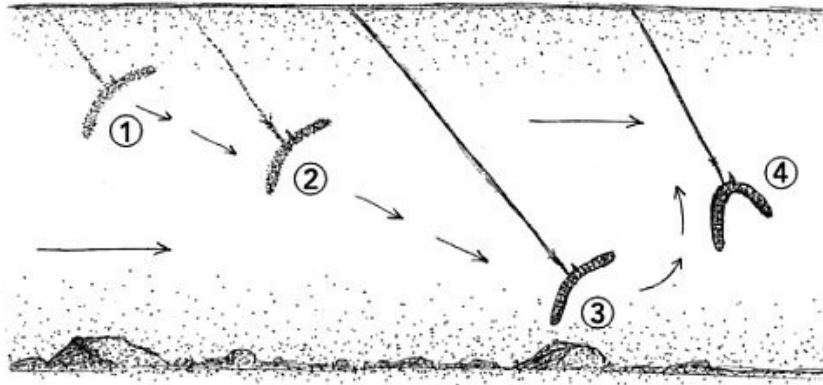
This small worm was rigged and fished wacky style. It worked well on this cold-front day when fish were extremely inactive.

the bank or wading slowly and stealthily. When floating, drift down to the spot very quietly, then silently lower the anchor. Just a couple of casts to each spot should be enough to tell you if there's anyone home.

Wacky Rigging

Various worms can work wacky-style. Senko-type worms 4 or 5 inches long are favored by some because they're heavier than other worms, so they cast better and sink faster. However, when the water is ultra-clear, a little 4-inch straight-tailed finesse worm might be more attractive to the fish. And some guys like to use standard 6-inch worms. You may need to experiment to see what the fish want that day.

WACKY WORM FISHING



A wacky worm slowly settles to the bottom while it drifts downstream, (1) to (3). The worm is then lifted two feet (4) and allowed to settle again. Maintain a tight line and watch closely for strikes.

Finding Hot Spots

Prime fish-holding locations on low-density waterways are seldom more than a few percent of the total water, and there might be less than one spot per mile. But most of these places are quite obvious, so they aren't too difficult to identify.

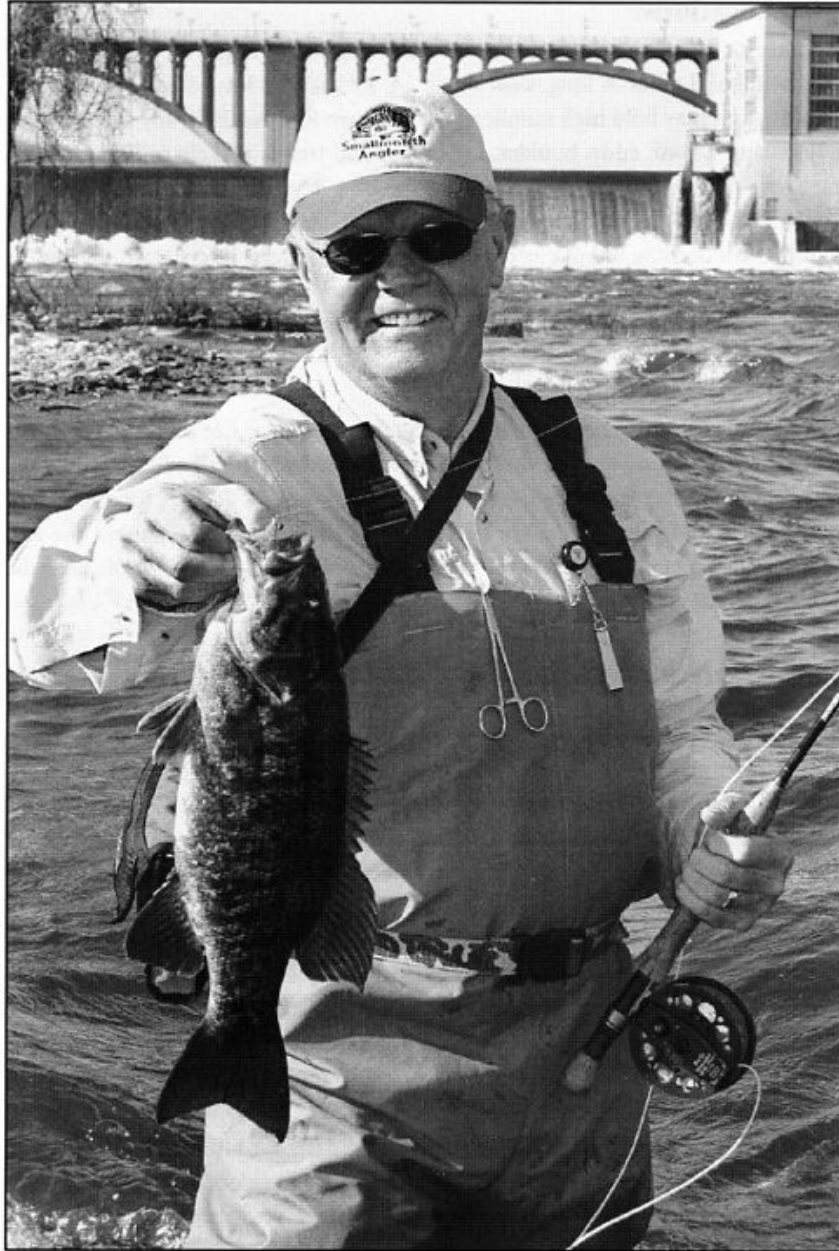
On silty, sandy streams, any *rocky rapids and runs* are prime. They may only be 50 yards long, but they will draw smallies like a magnet. On slow-flowing marshy streams, any *higher gradient stretches* are good because this is where rock or gravel substrates are exposed. In turbid rivers, any *tributaries and feeder creeks* that are even slightly clearer will draw bronzebacks. On rivers with little natural rock, *rip-rapped banks* are prime. On shallow streams, *deeper pools, especially bridge pools*, attract fish. And on almost any waterway, the *plunge pool* below a dam or waterfall is a hot spot. (The "Hot Spots in Low Density Water" chart lists hot spots for each type of water.).

HOT SPOTS IN LOW-DENSITY WATER

On silty or sandy streams →	Rocky rapids and runs
On slow, marshy streams →	Higher gradient stretches
On turbid rivers →	Clearer tributaries and feeder creeks
On rivers without much rock →	Riprapped banks
On shallow streams →	Deeper pools and bridge pools
On most waterways →	Dam or waterfall plunge pools



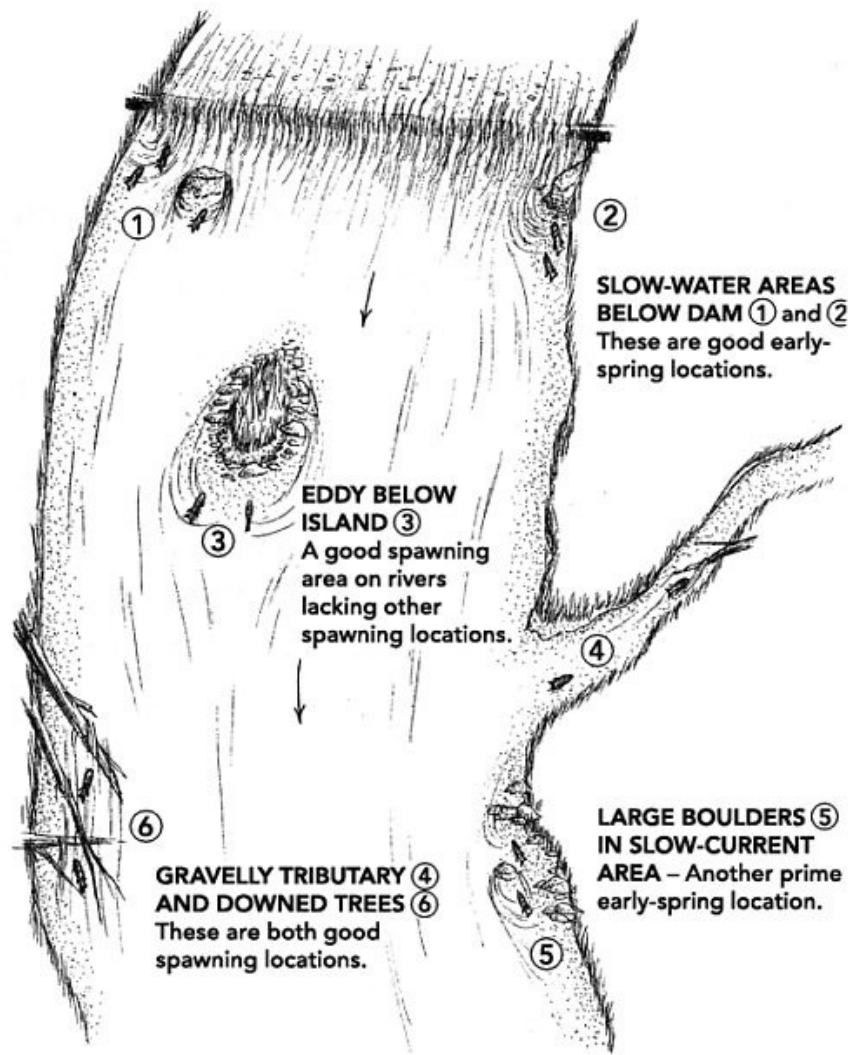
Before physically scouting these potential hot spots, look at detailed maps of the stream. Studying both printed paper maps and aerial maps on the internet will likely show many of these locations and will help narrow your search. But, of course, there's no substitute for actual on-the-water fishing to tell you if there are smallies in a spot. This means working each location hard. However, in your desire to thoroughly fish the water don't make the mistake of charging in too close or making too much noise. This might be the only good spot in miles, so don't mess it up with a sloppy approach.



Early season often means cold, high water. In these challenging conditions, two good locations are creek mouths and below dams like this one. Dan Johnson caught this 18-incher fishing slow along the bottom.

from the water! That's protective behavior! But of course, this behavior is also a source of great danger for smallmouth, because their aggressiveness makes them extremely vulnerable to angling during the spawn period. Except for a short time at the beginning of the cycle when females are around the nest, 80% to 90% of the bigger smallmouth that are caught during the spawn are nest-guarding males. As you may be aware, there is controversy about fishing during the spawn, even though it is legal in most areas.

SPRING & SPAWN LOCATIONS





SMALLMOUTH SEASONS IN BRIEF

EARLY SPRING (44 TO 52 DEGREES)

Smallmouth: Seeking slow current and warmer water in large eddies, creek mouths, below islands.

Fishing: Near bottom, ultra-slow retrieves.

LATE SPRING/PRE-SPAWN (53 TO 59 DEGREES)

Smallmouth: Concentrating near spawning sites.

Fishing: Target near-spawn zones, slow retrieves.

SPAWN (60+ DEGREES)

Smallmouth: Males guard nests and aggressively attack intruders.

Fishing: Target-casting to bank eddies, wood cover over gravel. Immediate release.

POST-SPAWN

Smallmouth: Sluggish, recuperative mode for 1 to 2 weeks.

Fishing: Go deeper, erratic retrieves, cover water.

EARLYSUMMER (UPPER-60S INTO 70S)

Smallmouth: In summer locations, actively feeding.

Fishing: In clear streams, consistently good, many presentations work.

MID & LATE SUMMER (70S TO MID 80S)

Smallmouth: Big fish, actively feeding, can be spooky in clear water.

Fishing: Excellent in stained and murky waters, fish mornings and evenings in clear rivers.

EARLY FALL (70 TO 58 DEGREES)

Smallmouth: Actively feeding in runs, tails of pools.

Fishing: Mid-depth Minnow Swing, sometimes topwaters.

MID & LATE FALL (UPPER 50S INTO 40S)

Smallmouth: Concentrating, move to wintering pools, may migrate long distances in north.

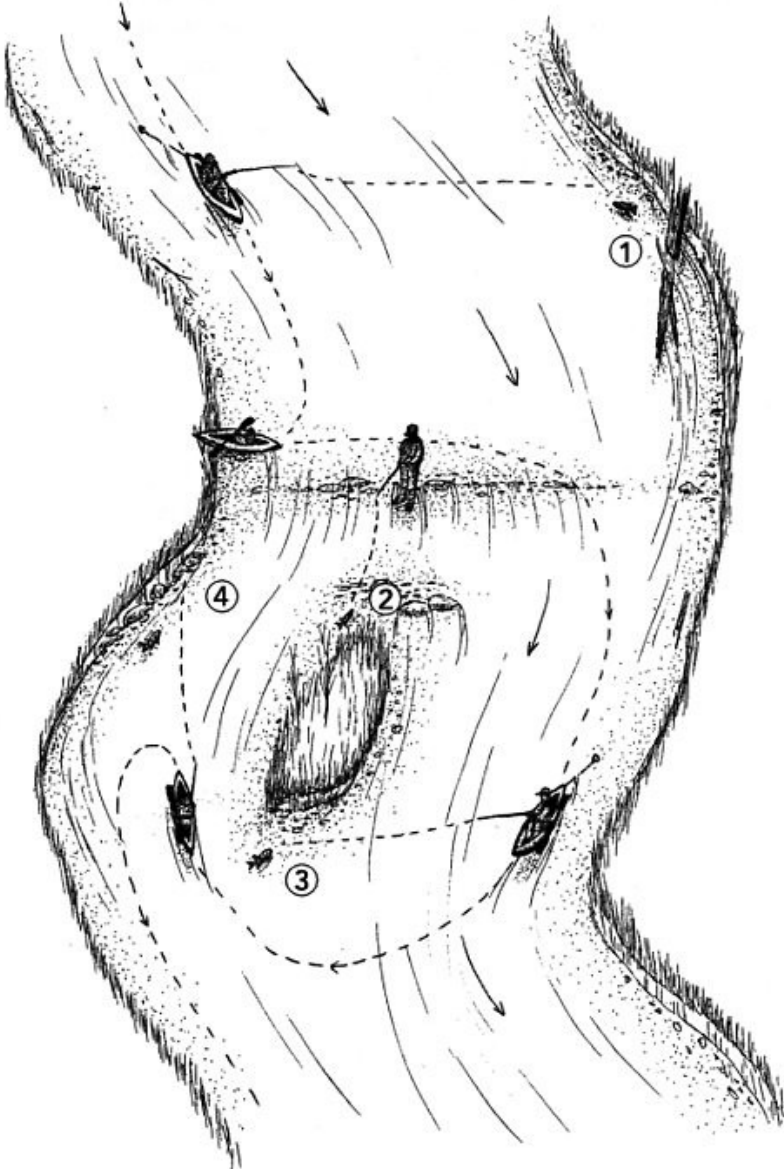
Fishing: Check water temps, fish afternoons on warmer days, fish near bottom.

WINTER (LOW-50S TO UPPER 30S)

Smallmouth: Sluggish, concentrated in wintering pools and slack water.

Fishing: Dress adequately, choose warmest days, Float 'n' Fly technique.

SNEAKING BY CRAFT



Fishing clear water, choose a route that will not alarm spooky fish. After working an outside bend (1) from the craft, park and wade into position to fish the head of the island (2). Then sneak the boat along the shallow inside bend, making long casts to the island eddy (3). Finally, a sneaky downstream approach to the rocky bank (4).

should strike quickly, use debarbed hooks and learn how to safely “pop” the hook out of throat-hooked fish. An even better option is to use circle hooks, which will lip-hook most fish, significantly reducing hooking mortality.

6) Bottom-Draggers

The simplest description of Bottom Dragging is retrieving a floating plastic bait a few inches above the bottom by attaching it to a heavy sinker system. For decades, live bait fishermen have been successfully using various bottom rigs like Lindy Rigs and Bait Walkers. Lake bass anglers also have their variations of the technique such as, “drop-shotting,” “split-shotting,” “Carolina rigging” and others. Bottom Dragging in rivers, if it’s done properly, can keep a plastic bait right at fish-eye level for long periods of time. This can be very effective during slow-bite periods. However, it’s also a rather tedious method of smallmouthing, so it’s not commonly used by river fishers, except in tough conditions to tempt sluggish smallies. Bottom Dragging is described in detail in the “Specialized Techniques” chapter.

Tim’s Top Twenty Favorites

Some of these lures have been favorites of mine for decades, others are more recent acquisitions. But they have all caught truckloads of smallies and have been tested in many different waters by various folks. Added together, they cover a broad array of angling situations. I really like them, and you may, too. Let’s start on the surface and work our way to the bottom.

1) Tiny Torpedo

Heddon came out with this smaller plastic version of their larger topwater nearly sixty years ago. For over half that time, the no-frills Tiny Torpedo has been my favorite surface lure. Some of my most memorable topwater catches have been with the Tiny T. This includes one of largest bronzebacks I’ve ever caught—a bruiser of nearly 22 inches that took the lure when I made a demonstration cast near the landing for my guiding client. Boy, was he impressed with the Torpedo! But that was an impossible act to follow, and none of our smallies were as remarkable the rest of that day.

Where/When to Use: This little propeller bait is versatile. It can be fished fast or slow, so it’s pretty decent as a search bait, and absolutely great as a target lure. It works best when clarity is good, but also does a fair job even when the water is cloudy.

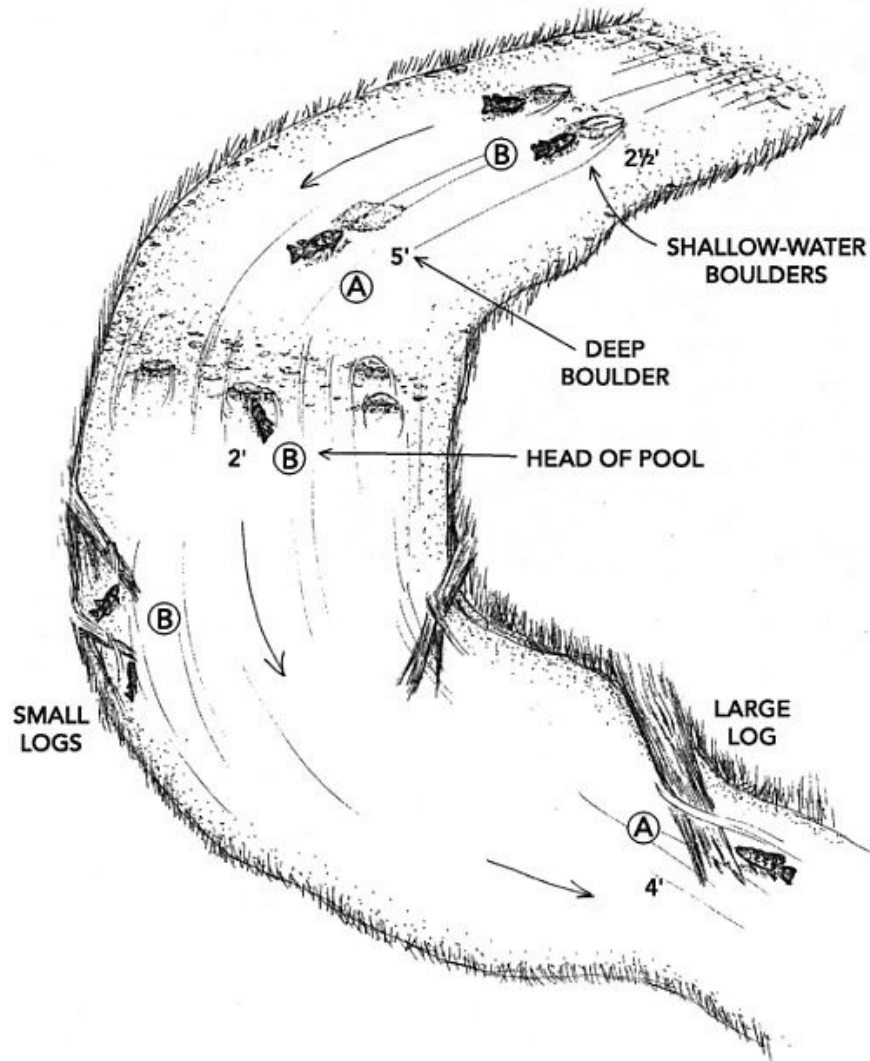
Fishing Tips: Some days a simple, steady cranking retrieve is hard to beat. But more often a more nuanced twitch-and-pause retrieve is best. Its excellent hooking ability is a big attribute. But check the lure after you get a strike, because fish often

fishing products. Get a nipper that will easily cut even a braid or heavy mono, and get a retractor with a locking safety pin that can't accidentally come off your shirt or vest. The best kind of retractor to get is a tube-style one with a plastic-coated, coiled cord. This type lasts much longer than a round retractor with a spring-loaded cord.



A well-stocked vest: plenty of lures, sunglasses, sunblock, insect repellent, nipper on a retractor, hook hone, forceps, extra spool, split shot, thermometer, camera, water and fruit.

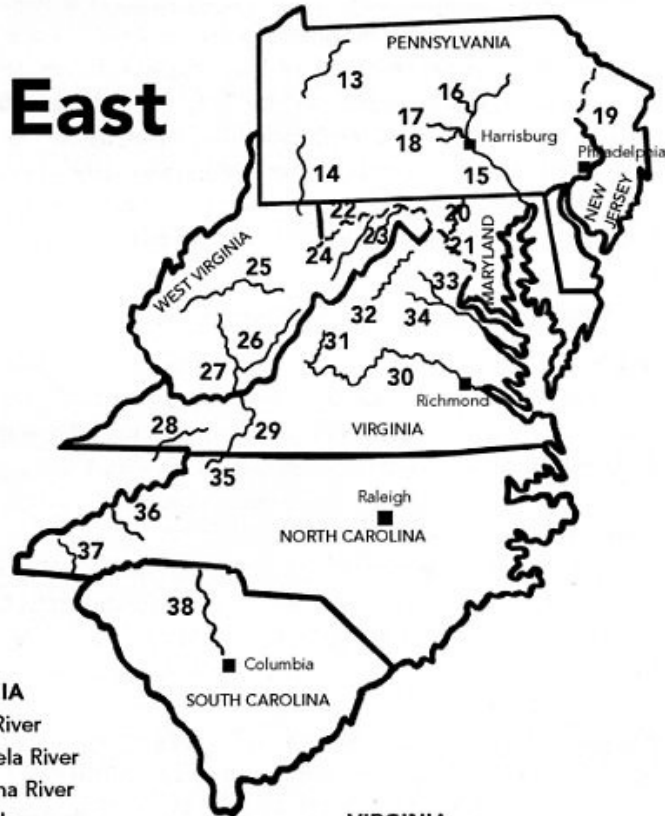
BIG FISH / SMALL WATER



The two (A) positions (a deep subsurface boulder and a large log in deep water) are prime big-fish locations in this small stream. The three (B) locations are good for smaller fish.

20

The East



PENNSYLVANIA

- 13. Allegheny River
- 14. Monongahela River
- 15. Susquehanna River
- 16. Penns Creek
- 17. Juniata River
- 18. Buffalo Creek

NEW JERSEY

- 19. Delaware River

MARYLAND

- 20. Monocacy River
- 21. Potomac River
- 22. North Branch Potomac River

WEST VIRGINIA

- 23. Cacapon River
- 24. South Branch Potomac River
- 25. Elk River
- 26. Greenbrier River
- 27. New River

VIRGINIA

- 28. North Fork Holston River
- 29. New River
- 30. James River
- 31. Cowpasture River
- 32. South Fork Shenandoah River
- 33. Rappahannock River
- 34. Rapidan River

NORTH CAROLINA

- 35. South Fork New River
- 36. French Broad River
- 37. Little Tennessee River

SOUTH CAROLINA

- 38. Broad River

24) West Virginia: South Branch Potomac River

The Water: When I first tried the South Branch 20 years ago, I was impressed with its productivity and how easy it was to fish. It's much the same today. This modest-sized river still has over 75 miles of good-to-excellent water in Grant, Hardy and Hampshire counties. With 18 different accesses and few major obstacles, the river offers plenty of good floats. On-foot fishing is also effective, especially above Petersburg.

The Fish: Famous for its 10- to 14-inchers, the South Branch also has some bigger fish, protected by two catch-and-release sections. Perhaps the best place to hook a heavyweight is in the lower catch-and-release section, 9 miles of deeper pools from Rommey to Blue's Beach Bridge.

Seasons, Special Tips: Floating and wading the upper river is most popular during late spring through mid-summer. Early in the season, water levels are too high for some anglers, and late-summer levels are often too low for easy floating. During low-water periods, finesse fishing with small, subtle baits can still be productive. And the morning and evening bites are excellent even during August.

Access & Use: The 14-mile stretch from Big Bend to Petersburg, with its narrow canyons, high cliffs and heavily forested banks, is a favorite of those seeking spectacular settings. A less wild, but still very fishy float is the 8-mile catch-and-release stretch from Welton Park to Fisher Bridge in Hardy County. The South Branch has less gradient downstream of Morefield, which means fewer shallow riffles, more pools and more floating pressure. Use can be heavy on weekends, but with such high fish populations even weekenders can score.

25) West Virginia: Elk River

Another Elk River in West Virginia is famous for its trout, but this much longer and larger Elk is an overlooked warmwater river. This low-gradient waterway loops through Braxton and Clay counties. Hwy. 4 closely parallels the stream, and floating is possible in the 60 miles from Frometown to Clendenin. While the Elk doesn't offer the spectacular beauty of higher-gradient rivers or the quietness of more remote waterways, its smallmouth fishing is better now than years ago. Wood deposited generously in outside bends is the prime place for both smallies and spotted bass. Carefully-placed topwaters can be good, fished slow and tight to the cover.

26) West Virginia: Greenbrier River

The Water: Though it doesn't carry as much flow as some bigger rivers, the picturesque Greenbrier is the longest undammed river in the eastern U.S. It offers

FISHING/SPORTS

Are You Missing Out?

Smallmouth bass are the most exciting catch in fresh water, and *rivers* are the best places to catch them.

Here's everything you need to know:

- 20 best lures • 102 top rivers • Big-fish tactics
 - Watercraft rigging • Boat-handling skills • Best topwater techniques • Proven subsurface presentations
 - Expert float fishing methods • Tactics for tough conditions • Wade fishing tips and tricks
- > How to fish dirty water, clear water, big rivers, and small streams
 - > Specialized techniques, including wacky worming and night fishing
 - > How to "read" a river and find the fish
 - > Specific techniques for all 9 fishing periods — even winter
 - > The low-down on rods, lines, and all river tackle
 - > Tips for those just starting out

Loaded with
Illustrations

...and so much more!

Numerous
Color Photos

TIM HOLSCHLAG, often called the Smallmouth Master, is the author of the famous books *Stream Smallmouth Fishing* and *Smallmouth Fly Fishing*, plus hundreds of smallmouth articles. He has personally fished 300 bronzeback rivers across the U.S. and Canada. Holschlag's 45+ years of smallmouth experience, plus techniques from local experts across the country, are packed into this new book.



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