

Smallmouth Bass After Dark

by *Darl Black* photos by the author

As the sun sinks below the horizon on a mid-summer evening, creatures of the night come out. Bats take to the air, chasing mosquitoes. Owls are ever watchful for a meal of rodent. Seldom seen during daylight, an army of skunks, raccoons and opossums now make an appearance. A nightshift change occurs in bodies of water as well as with particular prey and predators revealing themselves in the shallows.

With warmer water temperatures of summer, smallmouth bass in most clear water lakes and reservoirs take up positions in deeper water where temperatures are a tad cooler and baitfish schools are plentiful. During the day, these smallmouth bass may be 15- to 25-feet deep in some Pennsylvania waters. But, under the security of darkness, smallmouth bass frequently move shallower, seeking a favored prey, which comes out at night—crayfish. Of course, these smallmouth bass will never turn down an easy baitfish meal of shiners, minnows, suckers and small perch milling around the flats as well.

In my neck of the woods, I struggle to catch respectable smallmouth bass during a sunny, summer day from the clear waters of Tionesta Lake, Forest County; Woodcock Creek Lake, Crawford County; and Conneaut Lake, Crawford County. But after dark, it's a different story. If you have been striking out in attempts to catch smallmouth bass during daytime hours, consider trying the nightshift.



This smallmouth bass was caught in Tionesta Lake, Forest County.

When to fish

Anglers recognize there are good days and bad days for fishing, and it's the same for night angling. You will quickly discover anglers have differing opinions about how moon phase, cloud cover and other factors affect nighttime success. The most useful advice I heard is from my friend Jim Duckworth, a smallmouth bass guide in Tennessee with more nighttime hours under his belt than he cares to count.

"I have my best success on the three nights leading up to the full moon and the three nights leading up to the new moon," said Duckworth. "I prefer a light breeze from the south or west. Just as during the day, a wind from the north or east, which typically indicates a cold front, will likely shut down nighttime smallmouth bass. Under the light of a full moon, I fish the shady banks. During the dark of the moon, you don't have to worry about illumination from the moon."

Where to fish

Not all smallmouth bass are going to move shallow after dark. It depends on how deep the smallmouth bass schools are holding and their primary prey at that location. For most anglers, fishing shallow water is easier than fishing deep water, especially after dark. Therefore, most anglers are better off focusing their efforts on smallmouth bass that make nighttime forays in water less than 8-feet deep.

Probe areas where the deep water or river channel swings fairly close to the shoreline or to the edge of a shallow flat. On lakes that I fish after dark, my boat may be sitting in 12 to 18 feet of water, but my casts will land in approximately 4 feet or even shallower. More often than not, I want to land as close to the shoreline as possible. I'm usually targeting gravel and sand bottoms intermixed with larger rocks or sporadic vegetation. Rip-rap banks on marina entrances, causeways and dams also attract smallmouth bass. Swim beaches and boat ramp aprons are magnets for smallmouth bass at night, because crayfish and shiners show up there.

What to fish

In choosing lures, most night anglers agree that less is more. A handful of select lures can be more effective than an entire tackle box of baits. You want to have baits that imitate the smallmouth bass's prime night prey, crayfish, as well as ones that represent the baitfish component of the smallmouth bass's nighttime diet.

Rather than the finesse approach that you may take for smallmouth bass in clear water during the day, at night, think larger profile and louder. It's critical that your lures generate sound waves enabling smallmouth bass to pick up on the bait's location. Either the lure itself generates the vibration due to built-in action or a quiet lure, such as a jig, bangs hard objects on the bottom to generate vibrations.



Chris Wolfgong, Dale Black and Marilyn Black offer proof that Woodcock Creek Lake, Crawford County, produces nice smallmouth after dark. All fish were released following the photo.

Another consideration is choosing lure presentations that reduce the chance of entanglement with weed strands or getting snagged in rocks. Few things sour the night-fishing experience more than constantly cleaning vegetation strands off the bait or trying to free a snagged lure in the dark.

The following are my favorite night baits for smallmouth bass.

Jig-n-chunk: A skirted jig with a trailer is the all-time number one night bait for smallmouth bass feeding on crayfish. The recommended trailer is soft plastic, either a chunk cut or crayfish body imitator with flapping appendages. Retrieve with a bottom hugging lift-drop or constant contact drag. When employing a lift-drop, limit the lift to no more than a couple inches off the bottom. I prefer a football head jig design, because it will remain upright when dragged and land upright after each mini lift-drop. Use a weight heavy enough to feel the bottom. A $\frac{3}{8}$ -ounce head is usually better than a $\frac{1}{4}$ -ounce head for the shallowest water.

Colorado-blade spinnerbait: A short-arm single spinnerbait is popular with night anglers. For shallow water, I opt for a single #4.5 Colorado blade with a $\frac{3}{8}$ -ounce head. I always add a soft plastic double tail grub to a night spinnerbait. Let it fall to the bottom, then employ a pull-pause retrieve, contouring the bottom as you bring it back to the boat. The thump of the Colorado blade gets the attention of bass from a distance.

Metal-lip vibrating swim jig: Anglers better know this style of lure by the name chatterbait. It is a cross between a spinnerbait and a swimming jig. When retrieved steadily, it creates unbelievable vibrations. A chatter bait-style lure is a great search bait to cover territory. Work it slowly and steadily above the bottom. If bass are aggressively feeding, they will smack it.



A selection of night fishing lures for smallmouth bass include (left column) buzzbait, Colorado blade single spin, football head jig and (right column) Jitterbug, long minnow wake bait, chatter bait-style swimming jig and square lip crankbait.

Topwater: Make sure you have a surface lure tied on one rod. Fish it periodically during your time on the water. Some nights, smallmouth bass want no part of topwater baits. Other nights, you cannot keep it away from them. The key to topwater fishing at night is to select a lure, which is fished effectively with a slow constant retrieve. Erratic retrieves at night translate to missing fish. Two lures immediately should come to mind, a buzzbait and the classic Jitterbug.

Floating long minnow plug: The floating minnow plug is most effective at night when fished as a wake bait. This means retrieving it slow enough, barely under the surface, so v-ripples fan out on the surface behind the plug. It's a great presentation for calm nights when fished over spotty shallow grass.

Square-lip crankbait: Have you ever attempted to fish a bottom-bouncing jig on a rip-rap chunk rock bank in the dark? It's a nightmare. The jig is continually hung. Exit the jig and enter a shallow-running square lip crankbait. Reel slowly, touch a rock, pause, crank floats up, reel again, touch a rock, pause and bait backs up. Now, go fish in the dark. ☐



Enjoy the quiet of night fishing especially when smallmouth bass are biting.