



Smallmouth Bass Fishing on the Delaware River

by *Darl Black* photos by the author

One October morning, Dave Lehman and I were standing on the ramp at Sandts Eddy, just north of Easton surveying the Delaware River. We had driven from western Pennsylvania to fish for Smallmouth Bass on the Delaware River with river expert Blaine Mengel.

Within minutes of our arrival, Mengel pulled into the nearly empty parking lot with a jet boat in tow. After introductions, I commented on the flow. "I realize it's been a number of years since I've fished here, but the river looks a lot lower than I remember."

"Well, we are in drought conditions here, and this is as low as I've ever seen the river," said Mengel. "It's really too low to safely run a jet boat from this access to where I want to fish. Our best chance at bass will be a deeper water section, so we'll drive a little further north to launch in the Belvidere pool."

When he mentioned going further north on the Delaware River, I had a flashback to the very first time I laid eyes on the Delaware River some 40 years ago.

Fresh out of college, I had accepted a job in Cornwells Heights, just north of Philadelphia. Arriving several days early, I was exploring places to fish including Neshaminy State Marina. Sitting in my Dodge Dart with a canoe strapped on top, I watched the swirling debris-laden tide water rise on the river and realized the lower Delaware River was no place for Smallmouth Bass.

Fortunately, the next day at work, I made the acquaintance of Charles Lindenlaub, an enthusiastic angler and canoeist who immediately turned me in the right direction. "Go north, young man, go north," said Lindenlaub.

Over the next several years while working in lower Bucks County, I drove north almost every weekend between June and October to fish Smallmouth Bass on the Delaware River with new friends. I explored many stretches of the river between Milford and New Hope either by wading or by canoe, catching bass everywhere. At that time, my favorite area was from Dingmans Ferry to Bushkill.

After being absent from the Delaware River for many years, I was anxious to know Mengel's assessment of Delaware River Smallmouth Bass, so I was bombarding him with questions throughout our time on the river.

"Smallmouth Bass are pursued the entire length of the river from Hancock, New York, all the way south to Trenton, New Jersey. At the present time, I would say the best section for Smallmouth Bass runs from Milford down through the Water Gap to about Portland," said Mengel.

According to Mengel, a 23-year veteran of chasing Delaware River bronzebacks, location of Smallmouth Bass within the river is based on water level changes. In the early fall, river bass are primarily feeding on migrating pods of American Shad young and river herring young as they head downstream to the ocean. The better fishing opportunities occur during higher flows, because the preyfish are



concentrated in current seams thereby focusing on Smallmouth Bass feeding activity. The best conditions in the fall are 24 to 48 hours after a rise in the river, just as the water is beginning to clear but still has some stain to it. The higher flow pushes the bait and the bass into predictable shoreline eddies and current breaks.

“When the water level is very low, the current flow is reduced and migrating young can spread out almost anywhere. As a result, bass are also scattered. Because bass are not concentrated, you’ve got to fish harder and smarter during low flows in order to catch them. On sunny days during low flow periods, I target deep pools and deep flats that have current. Shad young will also stack up around mouths of tributary creeks when the water is low,” said Mengel.

“The absolute toughest bite occurs under bluebird skies during very low water conditions. Under these conditions, bass are likely to feed only at daybreak and just prior to sunset. The mid-day timeframe is usually a waste of time,” said Mengel.

Mengel went on to explain that grass beds and flat-layered rock ledges (locally referred to as horseback rocks) always hold some Smallmouth Bass regardless of the flow.

Mengel’s fall arsenal typically includes a spinnerbait, jerkbait and tube jig. During high flows, his choice is a $\frac{3}{8}$ - or $\frac{1}{2}$ -ounce spinnerbait with a white or white/chartreuse skirt. In low water, he drops to a $\frac{1}{4}$ -ounce spinnerbait. “Cast the lure to current cuts, let it sink, then slow roll the bait through the current. When bass are feeding during high water, this is a big fish lure. It’s also effective on Walleyes,” said Mengel.

In choosing a jerkbait, Mengel wants one that is close to the size of the baitfish. He drops down to as small as a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch minnow bait and never goes longer than 4 inches. In



Reflective shot of the Riverton-Belvidere Toll Supported Bridge on the middle Delaware River during the fall.

the early fall, he targets areas that are below riffles leading into deeper pools. As the water cools, he works a jerkbait around boulders within the pools.

“In clear water, jerkbaits usually catch the bigger bass. I prefer to match the natural hues of the river preyfish by using jerkbait colors like Pro-Blue, Tennessee Shad and anything that resembles shiners. But under stained water conditions, I go with bolder colors with orange bellies. Smallmouth Bass respond to gold jerkbaits in both clear and stained water. However, if the water is too dirty, don’t even tie a jerkbait on,” said Mengel.

For numbers of river Smallmouth Bass in the fall, the best lure is a tube jig according to Mengel. He upgrades to a $\frac{1}{4}$ -ounce head for deeper water and stronger current; otherwise he sticks with a $\frac{1}{8}$ or $\frac{3}{16}$ -ounce insert tube head. As with jerkbaits, under clear water, he chooses tube colors that represent natural baitfish hues including smoke and watermelon. When the water is stained, the darker crayfish colors and black get the nod.

“In recent years, I’ve discovered that downsizing tubes from the standard 4-inch length to 3-inch thin wall tubes dramatically improves the number of bass caught,” said Mengel. Jerkbaits and spinnerbaits generate reaction strikes. However, when fishing slowly with soft plastic baits, matching the size of preyfish becomes a high priority. Four inches is simply too big for shad and herring young.

“The average size of Smallmouth Bass caught in the upper and middle Delaware River in the fall is in the 14-inch range. If you hit the right flow conditions—high water but not over the bank and slightly stained water but not muddy—you can expect 15- to 18-inch bass. My personal best Delaware River Smallmouth Bass was a $22\frac{3}{4}$ -inch beauty,” said Mengel.

If you are serious about fishing for Smallmouth Bass on the Delaware River, Mengel recommends having a jet boat. “Sure, there are a few places in the upper and middle Delaware River where prop boats may be operated safely, but to cover the entire river effectively, jets are the way to go. I always avoid Skinner’s Falls and Foul Rift. However, I fish right to the top of Foul Rift on the upstream side and run up as far as safely possible into the Rift area from the downstream side. It is necessary to have a powerful trolling motor on your boat when fishing the faster water sections. And, always wear a life jacket,” said Mengel. ☐



Dave Lehman and Blaine Mengel compare baits for finicky Delaware River Smallmouth Bass.