

Float-Fishing.

the Juniata River

by Vic Attardo
photos by the author

The “Big J” and I go back a long way. I don’t come from around there, but I used to camp on its shores, awakened at night by the rumbling cacophony of passing freight trains only a few yards from the bank. In the morning, I’d gather my fly fishing gear and head down to the bridge at Port Royal, swimming across the current with the rod held over my head, until I reached the deepest pool where the big bass lived.

My favorite inventions of smallmouth fly patterns were created to fish the Big J, and one day I met a pair of cantankerous old billy goats shifting for stonecats in the river’s stones and silt, who gradually became two of the most important friends in my life.

Despite this intimacy with the river, I knew I didn’t know everything there was to know about it. Well, who does? But when Bob Lorantas, Fish & Boat Commission Warmwater Unit Leader, told me the Juniata was his favorite river as well, the decision to fish together was easy.

You can run portions of the Juniata in a



propeller boat (if props aren't important to you) and you can certainly jet upstream and downstream (if money is no object when buying a motor), but the surest, and cheapest, way to cover the river is with a canoe. With a beaked boat, you can work the water as you go, or you can park the craft along the shore and give a piece of water a real going over. This is what Lorantas likes to do.

During the first week of August, we started early in the morning below Lewistown heading east to Mifflintown. Early August is not the best time to gather tons of smallmouths on any Pennsylvania river, unless you fish early or late. For one thing, the water temperature is usually tepid, and if the Juniata River has a down side, it's the color of the water in late summer. On this day, the water was brown and we couldn't see the bottom, or even the sub-surface rocks, until we bumped into them.

As Bob explained, the water color can be caused either by algae blooms or by storms transporting excessive sediments from watershed disturbances such as construction or farming activities. The Juniata River, he noted, carries an extremely high alkalinity level, 100 parts per million. By contrast, the Allegheny and the Delaware rivers are only about 40 parts per million. While the J's high numbers allow it to buffer the effects of acid rain, it makes it a very fertile river. This fertility translates through the food chain from plankton to crayfish (of which there are tons) all the way up to smallmouth bass.

The Juniata's brown water causes a lot of anglers problems, but it doesn't have to. For a time I labored under the



misconception that to conquer the color I should fish deep and dark. I figured that dark baits or dark flies along the bottom would be most successful. I surmised that in the murkiness they would be more visible. It's a fairly universal concept and it's been known to work. The problem is that it produces only limited success on the Juniata.

Even fishing with margined madtoms, a.k.a. stonecats, the top smallmouth bait on the J and the Susquehanna, you can't cut through the brown. I had some stonecats along with



Our drifting technique was to cast across the current and keep the bait to our side. It wasn't good to let the lure get behind you, because this would cause snags, and you didn't want it too far in front. By casting across the current, the bass saw the full profile of the bait. This side view is also important when fishing in murky water.

me on this jaunt with Bob, and though one caught the biggest bass of the day, they didn't do well at all.

For one thing, to work stonecats you have to work the rod, lifting the bait as it gets into rocks and lowering the rod tip when coming to deeper slots. But in the murky water, I couldn't see the rocks, so after hanging up a half-dozen times and then having to paddle the canoe against the current to retrieve the bait, I madly gave up on madtoms.

To cut through the brown, I've learned you have to make

a lot of noise. Bob knows it, too. Stonecats are too silent. So too are most flies. To get the bass's attention in tan water you have to use something with rattles, something they can key in on, find the bait and get a meal. The trick is to use small, shallow-running crankbaits with clanking rattles.

With years of experience behind him, Bob prefers the shape of a Big O-type bait. Instead of buying an expensive name brand, he purchases generic O bodies from a catalog company and then adds sharp hooks. Primarily he uses one color, a bright crayfish.

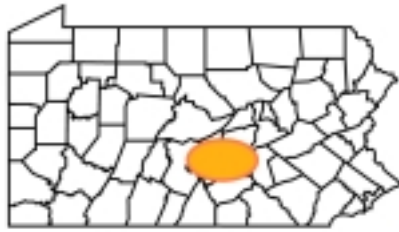
Even though the fishing was not top notch for the river, we both managed to catch 15 bass each in about five hours of hard fishing (minus an hour for lunch and camera work). And as I've seen before on the J, the best fishing may not occur at sunrise, but later in the morning when the fog burns off. I was still catching bass at 1:30 p.m., when we climbed out of the canoe.

There were short sections of the river where we found the bass stacked up, but the structure we took them from was varied. We plucked bass through riffles and subsequent chutes and runs. However, the most

consistent fishing came from the moderately flowing pools—or what appeared to be pools.

Having spent some time in this section of the J, I know the pools were places where the river's limestone ledges transected the current, forming a maze of hiding places for bass. The smallies lie before or behind the ledges and wait for the river to bring them food. On this day, the river brought them treble-hooked crankbaits.

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Juniata River Accesses

1. Warrior's Ridge Access. Off PA Route 305.
2. Smithfield Access. Fourth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue in Huntingdon.
3. Point Access. Off U.S. Route 22 east of Huntingdon.
4. Shamut Access. Off PA Route 103 between Mount Union and Newton-Hamilton.
5. Newton-Hamilton Access. At Newton-Hamilton on PA Route 986.
6. Granville Access. Three miles west of Lewistown off PA Route 103.
7. Lewistown Access. Just above River Bridge in Lewistown off U.S. Route 22.
8. Mifflintown Access. Half-mile west of Mifflintown on PA Route 32.
9. Mifflin Borough Access. Downstream from the PA Route 35 bridge.
10. Walker Access. At Mexico on PA Route 32.
11. Muskrat Springs Access. Village of Center, 2.5 miles east of Mexico on PA Route 32.
12. Thompsettown Access. Half-mile south of Thompsettown on PA Route 333.
13. Greenwood Access. 2.5 miles south of Millerstown, off U.S. Routes 22 and 322 on old Route 22.
14. Amily Hall Access. In the village of Amity Hall, off U.S. Routes 11 and 15 and U.S. Routes 22 and 322, on old Route 22.

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Stopping along a riffle gave Bob and me a chance to examine the river bottom. It was littered with crayfish shells and marbled with small mussels about the size of the nail on your little finger. Bob pointed out that these were Asiatic mussels, an alien species that is crowding out the river's native mollusks.

The Juniata River has become Bob's laboratory in helping to assess the state Big Bass program. In 1995, Big Bass regulations were applied to a 19.5-mile section from Newport upriver to Port Royal, and in 2002, the Fish & Boat Commission expanded these regulations to include another 15 miles from the mouth near Duncannon upriver to Port Royal.

With Lorantas as the leader, the Commission made a comparison of smallmouth bass populations from 1995 through 2000. For that study, population characteristics were compared in a "treatment reach," which covered the 19.5-mile Big Bass section, to a "control reach" from Port

Royal to Lewistown, under regular statewide regulations. Over 2,200 bass were tagged in each segment. Results relied on anglers returning tags.

“We found that the number of bass between 12 and 15 inches exhibited an increasing trend from 1995 to 2000 in the Big Bass reach and a decreasing trend in the control reach,” Lorantas said.

Even though many outside factors might be involved, such as drought and angler participation, Lorantas believes the Big Bass regulations did what they were intended to do.

“Differences in survival and exploitation (that is, fishing mortality), as well as trends in density, clearly illustrate that harvest restrictions increased density of bass in the Big Bass reach,” Lorantas said.

But here’s the fun part for all smallmouth fans.

“An interesting and in some ways challenging finding resulted from the study: The level of movement of bass from their initial tagging location to the location of capture by anglers. Although most smallmouth bass moved less than 15 km (9.3 miles), there was a net downstream movement of 5.1 miles.



“This downstream movement likely resulted from capture of upstream-moving spawners that eventually descended the river and were caught by anglers,” Lorantas said.

“One smallmouth bass moved downriver 72 miles and was caught in the Susquehanna River near Harrisburg, and one moved out into the Susquehanna and then up the Susquehanna for a total move of 51 miles,” Lorantas said.

Gosh, I love what you can still find out about the Juniata. Be sure to launch a noisy crankbait to tempt the J’s smallmouth bass! ☐

More than Smallmouths

Smallmouth bass aren’t the only fish in the Juniata sea. Besides smallies, we also caught rock bass. When I first started fishing the Big J, I caught a lot of rockies—big rockies. Then, in the early 1990s, I noticed a decline in the population. With angler reports of fewer large rock bass in the Juniata River, the Fish & Boat Commission decided to enact a 10-fish limit on rock bass in the Juniata beginning this year. Lorantas indicated that several biotic and abiotic elements can affect density of rock bass, including an increase in density of smallmouth bass. Remember that in the early 1990s, the Commission shifted from a 10-inch minimum to a 12-inch minimum for river bass, and that rule enhanced smallmouth populations, perhaps at some consequence to rock bass. It was reported that some concerns about rock bass over-harvest originated from locales where rock bass concentrated in late winter and spring.

Adjusting angler harvest represented one of the few controls the Commission had for enhancing rock bass density, even though the Commission recognized that the change might have a limited enhancement effect outside of those specific locales and seasons where rock bass were concentrated and harvest was intense. The new rule creates a uniform fishing regulation for rock bass harvest on the Juniata River and is consistent with sportfishing trends that favor limiting harvest. Summer fishing for rock bass remains good on the Big J and will likely get better!

Walleyes are also an important species in parts of the Juniata River, and there are anglers who concentrate on them. But for my money, it’s the Big J’s collection of muskies that gets my blood boiling. I have seen dark, rainy days on the river when a pair of toothy critters would hunt the base of riffles chasing suckers and such into the shallows. A well-placed bucktail spinner will catch these fish, but that’s another story for another day.—VA.