

21 Tips for Taking Susquehanna River Smallmouths

by Art Michaels

The main-stem Susquehanna River from the confluence of the North and West branches at Sunbury to the Maryland border provides some of the best smallmouth bass fishing on the East Coast. The main stem includes more than 100 miles of rock ledges, islands, riffles, pools, grass beds and deep, lakelike sections. These varied, irregular elements provide excellent smallmouth bass habitat.

Use these 21 tips this summer to raise your score on main-stem Susquehanna River smallmouth bass.

1 In the low water conditions of summer, you can see more of the substrate than you can during periods of higher water. Steer clear of featureless areas. Look for rocky places, weed beds and islands that taper into deeper water.

2 In low, clear water, smallmouths can be easily frightened. The readily visible sight of an angler standing on a casting deck will surely spook smallmouths. In these conditions, approach fishing targets quietly and use long casts and quick retrieves. Wear muted earth-tone colors.

3 Green or brown algae blooms when water temperatures reach 80 degrees and above. To score during algae blooms, work areas of fast water, including riffles and chutes. If you must fish the algae, work lures very slowly.

4 The entire main-stem Susquehanna probably won't become muddy from a summer downpour, but its tributaries might. After a storm, fish the areas

downstream of the tributary confluences where the main stem's clearer water and a tributary's turbid water meet.

5 Don't make a smallmouth look directly into the sun to see your lure. Position your boat so that you are casting toward the sun. This means that a smallmouth eyeing your lure will be looking away from the sun as it pursues your lure. The fish will be able to see your offering more clearly and stay focused on the moving object.

6 For the best evening action, fish the western shore. As the sun sets, the shadows of the western shore loom larger and larger on the water. Smallies are likely to forage in these broadening areas of shaded water. Avoid the sun-drenched eastern shoreline in the evening. Fish the eastern shoreline in the morning, even though the shaded areas will recede as the sun rises.

7 Begin fishing at first light. The bass will have had their longest rest period of the day then from anglers, so with a quiet approach, your chances of spooking fish are lowest.

8 During the day, cast to shady spots, where smallmouths will hide. The best daytime action may occur in cloudy weather.

9 Because a commotion can easily scare smallmouth bass, let surface lures rest for a few seconds before beginning the retrieve. Smallies might initially turn away, but they'll give your offering a second look after a moment when you begin the retrieve. Use this tactic especially in quiet, shallow, clear-water conditions.

10 Keep hellgrammite, crayfish, nightcrawler and minnow rigs simple. Use a light-wire size 6 hook for hellgrammites and worms and a size 4 hook for crayfish and minnows. Use small splitshot.

11 An 8-foot or 9-foot fly rod matched with 8-weight line works well. You need the 8-foot or 9-foot length to keep your false casts high above the water and to cast into the wind. These combinations also let you heave heavier streamers and bugs. In low water, go with 6-weight or 7-weight line. Most fly rodders opt for floating weight-forward line and a reel that spools at least 100 yards of backing.

12 Spinning tackle for the shallower, faster-flowing river sections includes fast-tipped rods of about 6 or 7 feet matched with 4-pound- or 6-pound-test line. Lighter line decreases drag from the current. A rod with a substantial butt lets you best impart action to jigs and plastic offerings. The fast tip lets you best detect strikes in deep water.

13 Use light jigheads in the shallower flowing river portions. Eighth-ouncers are a good starting point.

14 York Haven, Safe Harbor, Holtwood and Conowingo dams create deeper, lakelike river sections. Parts of these pools can accommodate larger boats with higher-horsepower engines than can the shallower upriver areas. Approaching

these dams can be dangerous. Know the locations of these dams, and steer clear of them both from upriver and downriver.

15 For fishing the more lakelike areas backed up by the lower river's dams, use spinning tackle with 6-pound-test and lures of a quarter-ounce to about three-eighths-ounce.

16 Use heavier casting gear for the deeper water and clifflike rock walls of the lower-river pools. Use rods of around 5.5 feet to 6.5 feet, line of about 8- to 10-pound-test, and buzzbaits, spinnerbaits and crankbaits that range from a quarter-ounce to a half-ounce.

17 Rig your boat for running silently so that the big ones know you're there only when you hook them. Carpet the deck, speak softly and lay down equipment gently.

18 Rig three or four rods ready to go and place them on your boat deck. In this way you can switch quickly from a fly rod to spinning gear or to casting tackle, increasing your versatility.

19 From Sunbury to the area near the Commission's Fort Hunter Access, in Dauphin County, you'll find great conditions for a float trip. This section's islands and grass beds invite anglers to step out of their boats and wade.

20 You'll find similar conditions of islands and grass beds from the Dock Street Dam at Harrisburg to the area near the Commission's Goldsboro Access, just south of Middletown at Goldsboro. Stay away from this dam and from the inflatable dam at Sunbury.

21 Note that Big Bass Program regulations apply to the main-stem Susquehanna from the inflatable dam at Sunbury to Holtwood Dam. Different special regulations apply to Conowingo Reservoir up to Holtwood Dam. For details on these regulations, consult the *Summary of Fishing Regulations and Laws*, or visit the Commission's web site, www.fish.state.pa.us. ☐

