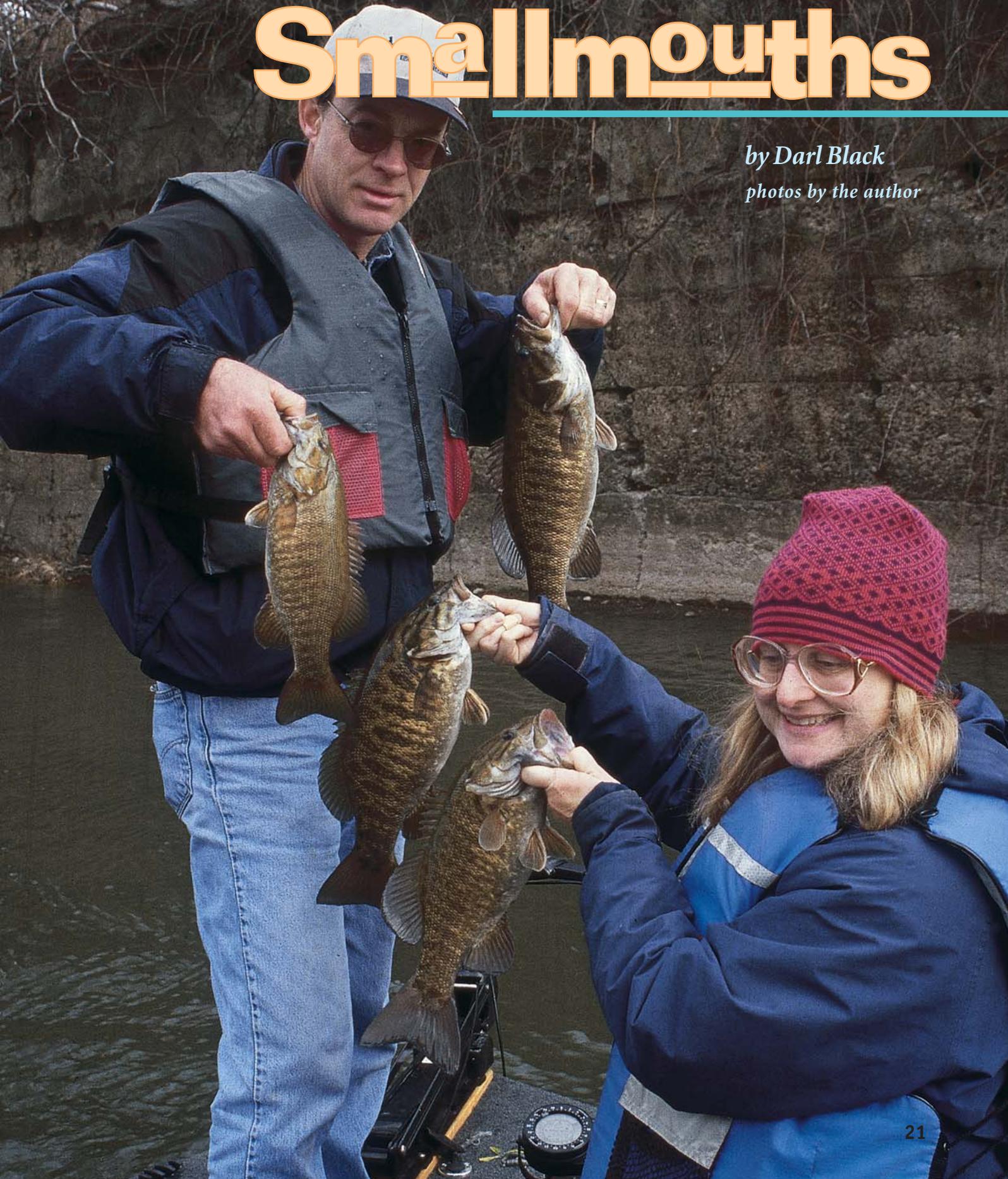


Cold-Water River Smallmouths

*by Darl Black
photos by the author*



“I bet you a cup of coffee and a piece of pi

“You’re on!” Replied fishing buddy Kneal Wiegel, a second-generation Allegheny River rat and owner of a local boat dealership. “You lure me out on the river in December to fish smallmouths when everyone knows only walleyes bite in water this cold. Then, instead of rigging one of these excellent river chubs that I ‘borrowed’ from my brother’s bait box, you insist on fishing an artificial lure and claim it’s going to outfish live bait. That’s being a little cocky, or crazy. Let me say this...I like my coffee black and I want a scoop of vanilla ice cream on that slice of warm Dutch apple.”

I hadn’t intended to sound arrogant, although I will concede to being a bit crazy and at times a touch competitive when it comes to fishing. Nor am I a gambler. But making a friendly wager for dessert on this day was a sure thing.

During recent weeks, I had encountered smallies stacked in apparent wintering holes on the Allegheny, and they were feeding on a predictable schedule. The weather and water conditions had remained stable, and I was optimistic that we were going to catch bass that day. So optimistic was I that I even persuaded my wife to take a day of vacation to join us. If I failed to produce, I would feel the heat from several directions.

Our planned ramp departure coincided with the mid-morning bite. We anchored within an easy cast of a breakline where smallies had been moving twice a day to eat. I explained to my boat mates where to place casts so that either their live bait or jigs would drift into the pocket. While Kneal scooped a red-tail chub from the bait bucket and my wife dosed her tube jig with garlic scent, I was already firing a cast to the current break that brushed a steep dropoff on a submerged gravel bar.

My scented stickworm sank slowly and drifted into the pocket. I simply let it rest on the bottom without imparting any action. I began to count quietly to myself. At “one-thousand five” I felt a slight tick and the line began to move. I responded with a sweeping hookset, and the first smallmouth of the day immediately went airborne—even though the water temperature was in the low 40s. Got to love those river smallies!

Cold-water adjustments

When I was a youngster just getting into fishing, a local river fisherman told me that smallmouths could not be caught in cold water. He claimed bass quit eating when water temperatures dropped much below 50 degrees, and walleyes took up the slack. Over the years I learned that the old-timer’s opinion was inaccurate.

Nowadays, knowledgeable anglers understand that bass continue to eat as water temperatures drop, although the frequency and amount of food intake lessens. However, with water temperatures in the mid-30s, the point of diminishing returns has likely been reached: The effort expended to catch a single smallmouth may not be worth it.

Furthermore, river bass change locations in the late fall, moving from shallower and stronger current-flow areas to relatively deeper and slower current-flow areas. In December, it is unlikely you will catch bass in the areas that produced through the summer. For some bass, the location change may be a hundred yards, but for others the change may be measured in miles.

To catch a chilled smallmouth

First, you don’t catch smallmouths in the late fall or early winter by staying home or going Christmas shopping. You have to get your line wet, which means you are probably going to get cold fingers and rosy cheeks. But if you dress appropriately in layers topped with a windproof and water-resistant shell, the rest of your body should be just fine! Always wear your PFD.

Second, fishing without a boat during this time of year is a major handicap on most river sections. Sure, there may be a key bass winter-over spot in your river that shore anglers can reach from the bank, but those areas are surely limited. Persuade a buddy who has a boat that fishing for smallies in late November and into December is more energizing than sitting in front of the television!

Next, you can leave the live bait at home—at least most of the time. The serious river smallmouth angler has complete confidence in a minimal selection of lures for cold-water bass. In my experience, when fishing live preyfish in the late fall, you end up



e that I'll have a smallmouth in the boat

before you get
rigged and
baited."



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catching incidental walleyes, muskies, pike and smaller bass. That's fine if you are simply fishing for whatever is biting. But if your sights are set on quality smallmouth bass, go with selected artificial lures.

Finally, Commonwealth rivers typically run slightly higher and slightly more off-color in the late fall than in the summer. This isn't a bad thing. But when a river turns the color of chocolate milk, smallmouth success takes a nose dive. High, muddy water is not a good thing. In this case, consider that Christmas shopping you still have to do!

Fantastic five

With water temperatures between the high 40s and mid-30s, a limited number of lures are in play for smallmouths. I routinely carry only a handful of baits this time of year:

- **Tube jigs.** Tubes are arguably the most universal lures for river smallmouths in any season. I've caught smallies on tubes with water temperatures in the 30s. Fished on an insert

jighead weighing between 1/8-ounce and 5/16-ounce and available in an unbelievable array of colors, a 3.5-inch or 4-inch tube can represent whatever smallmouths are feeding on at the time. The tube jig, like any jig presentation in a river, should be fished with the current flow. Make quartering casts upstream, and let the bait be swept along with the current. Use a heavy enough head so that it just lightly ticks the bottom occasionally. My favorite colors vary depending mainly on water color: Smoke-purple flake or watermelon for clear water, golden shiner (black back/gold-flake sides) or green pumpkin for average or normal clarity, and dark pumpkin with chartreuse tail for dingy water.

- **Action-tail grub.** This category covers both the curl-tail and shad-tail versions of popular brand-name grubs. I go to an action tail when I want to swim a soft plastic off the bottom, sort of like slow-rolling a spinnerbait. When the water turns dingy, I opt for 5-inch larger-profile grubs in darker colors with chartreuse or orange tails.

- **Soft sticks.** This grouping includes the blunt-end stickworm and fish-shaped soft jerkbait. Many anglers recognize the soft jerkbait as an incredible surface and sub-surface jerk lure when water temperature is above 50 degrees. But few anglers fish it once the water temperature dips into the 40s. Yet, the soft jerkbait and the salty stickworm are fantastic for a cold-water do-nothing deadstick drift. Rig a baitfish-colored 4-inch stickworm on a 2/0 wide-gap hook or a 5-inch to 6-inch soft jerk on a 3/0 hook. To make the soft plastic sink faster, insert a nail weight into the body or crimp a splitshot onto the line. Cast the lure slightly upstream of the target area, allowing the stick to drift to the bottom. Do nothing. Wait 60 seconds for a pickup. If there are no takers, reel in and redirect the cast so that the lure takes a slightly different path.

- **Suspending jerkbait.** These hardbody minnow baits have a reputation for catching bass in lakes during early spring. They are every bit as effective on rivers in the late fall for depths to

6 feet and water temps to about 40 degrees, perhaps slightly colder under some circumstances. Cast out, wind the jerkbait below the surface and begin a pull-pause retrieve. The burst of flash and movement followed by the suspended pause resembles an injured or stunned baitfish. This drives smallies wild. Don't get over-eager in working this lure—it's the pause that triggers strikes, and the longer you can withstand the temptation to pull or jerk the bait, the more strikes you will get in cold water. Also, some brand-name lures in this category perform much better than others. So if you acquire a dud, don't give up on suspending jerkbaits—sample several brands.

• **Hair jigs.** Hair jigs are the “go-to” lure for hardcore smallmouth anglers during the coldest part of the fishing season. Hair-jig presentations are very much a bottom-contouring pull-pause retrieve. Quality hair jigs in weights from 5/32-ounce to 3/16-ounce have an undulating swimming action in the water. They very much look alive. Hair experts on the Allegheny, Susquehanna and Delaware rivers favor brown, olive or basic-black jigs. Commercially available quality hair jigs are a rare commodity. You will not find good ones in a mass-merchandise tackle store. Most hair jig fishermen tie their own with natural rabbit, bucktail or bear hair, and some excellent products are occasionally made from craft hair. Never add scent to hair jigs. The oily residue mats the hair, destroying the fluid movements.

Keep in mind that smallmouth bass are “bunched-up” at this time of year. It takes extra effort to find them because they are not as spread out as in summer. Therefore, keeping limits from these winter-over sites can jeopardize quality bass angling over wide sections of a river. Please release all bass.

Late fall offers excellent smallmouth bass fishing on Pennsylvania's rivers. Don't let a little cold weather—or old thinking—keep you from the action. ☐



An overview of smallmouth bass seasonal migrations in Pennsylvania rivers goes something like this:

● During the summer, active, aggressive smallmouths (that is, catchable fish) will be stationed on current breaks relating to fast water, including runs, chutes, riffles and hardpan lifts; or they'll roam shallow shoals during low-light periods. They feed on a variety of prey, including crustaceans, insects and minnows.

● When the river temperature starts to cool in early fall, smallmouths begin to target baitfish more intently, while still relating to relatively fast, shallow-water areas. This “shallow-water” feeding frenzy generally peaks with water temps in the mid- to low 50s.

● As water temperature continues to drop, smallmouth bass migrate to wintering areas. Wintering sites are characterized by slower or deflected flows. These protected areas include extended natural pools (particularly outside bends); dredged sites; “holes” of slightly deeper water situated in eddies, downstream of islands and below bridge pillars; or slack-water pools in slower-moving tributaries to the main river. Most sites will have additional obstacles on the bottom (large boulders, ledge rock outcropping, sunken logs) to break the current further and provide added cover during times of particularly strong flows.

● By the time water temperatures drop to the upper 40s, a majority of smallmouth bass have vacated fast-water locations and are settling in to slower water for the winter. However, cold water temperatures do not preclude smallies from moving shallow to feed, as long as they can immediately drop back to their sanctuary. Therefore, it's not uncommon to catch river smallies in only a few feet of water during stable or warming trends during the cold-water period.

When applying this information to your locale, remember that each of Pennsylvania's major river systems is uniquely different. Bottom composition, structure and wintering depths are not identical. Furthermore, although smallmouth bass in all river systems undergo a similar seasonal progression, the time will vary slightly because weather is not uniform statewide.—DB.