

# STEEL CITY

## Smallmouth Bass



photo-Jeff Knapp



by Dennis Tubbs



The waterways of Pittsburgh, also known as the Steel City, make it a unique and beautiful city. Most people admiring the view aren't aware that the waters teem with life. In fact, there are over 50 fish species that can be found in Pittsburgh's rivers. One of the most popular gamefish there is the smallmouth bass.

[www.fish.state.pa.us](http://www.fish.state.pa.us)



## The fish

Smallmouth bass are members of the sunfish family. They are native to the Ohio River Watershed, which includes the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers, locally known as the “Three Rivers.” Until the mid-1800s, smallmouth bass could be found only in the Great Lakes and the Ohio River Watershed.

With the industrial age and resulting pollution of the late 1800s, the number of smallmouth bass declined in the Three Rivers. Steel production was the dominant industry from the 1800s through the 1970s. Hence, Pittsburgh’s nickname is “Steel City.” Major pollution clean-up efforts through the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a resurgence of the smallmouth bass population. Today, Pittsburgh-area anglers can regularly enjoy the thrill of hooking smallmouth bass. Anglers report catching smallmouth bass in the 5- and 6-pound range with fish of 1 to 3 pounds the norm.

In two recent Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission fish samplings, smallmouth bass were the dominant gamefish. In May 2003, Commission biologists found 11 fish species during night electrofishing on the Monongahela River at the Braddock Lock and Dam tailwaters. Smallmouth bass accounted for 43 percent of the gamefish and panfish. In June 2004, during a similar sampling on the Allegheny River in the area of Lock and Dam #2, at Sharpsburg, smallmouths accounted for 45 percent of the surveyed gamefish and panfish. The smallmouths in the Allegheny River sampling ranged from 4 to 20 inches long. To review the results of current Three Rivers fish samplings, visit the Commission’s web site, [www.fish.state.pa.us](http://www.fish.state.pa.us), and under “Regional Information” navigate to the Area 8 Fisheries Management Reports.

## Gear

Steel-City smallmouth bass are great fighters, so when you fish on the rivers you need strong line. Spool your reel with a quality 8-pound- to 12-pound-test line and consider a medium-action spinning rod-and-reel combo. A



photo-Dennis Tubbs

baitcasting outfit spooled with 10-pound-test line will also help you land the river’s smallmouth bass.

## Bait

Live-bait anglers do very well with shiners in the 3-inch range and 1-inch to 2-inch crayfish. These live baits can be found at many area tackle shops. Circle hooks placed through the bait’s back help keep shiners looking livelier and can therefore attract more strikes. Circle hooks are preferred by local anglers for catching larger fish.

For anglers who prefer to use artificial lures, the best advice is often “location, location, location.” Locating habitat in which your favorite artificial lure



photo-Jeff Knapp

resembles the dominant food source for bass is tricky, but it is the key to catching larger fish. A crankbait in a shad or fire-tiger color is an excellent lure for locating bass schools. Plastic baits and jigs in blue and black or dark-brown are excellent baits for use around rip-rap (partially submerged rocks) along the water’s edge. The shallow flats located downstream of shoreline points are great places to find bass. Casting slow-sinking plastic lures over these flats is a tedious technique, but it can produce great dividends for the patient angler.

## When to fish

Bass harvest season on the Three Rivers runs from the first Saturday after June 11 through October 1. The creel limit is six fish that are 12 inches or larger. The extended season runs from October to April of the following year with a creel limit of four fish that are 15 inches or larger. Be certain to check the *Pennsylvania Summary of Fishing Regulations and Laws* for current seasons before heading to the Three Rivers. Specific regulations on the Allegheny River’s Pool 3 limit bass to a 15-inch minimum year-round. Catch-and-release angling for smallmouth bass on the Three Rivers is open year-round. Please become familiar with all special regulations.

In early spring, when the water temperature reaches 50 degrees, smallmouth bass can be found near shallow areas because they are in a pre-spawning mode. At this time, fishing at any time of day can be productive. As the summer sun warms the water past 60 degrees, bass move to deeper water and are in post-spawn mode. They may be very aggressive early in the morning or just before dusk. When summer weather raises water temperatures near 70 degrees, smallmouth bass seek deeper water, often below locks and dams. At this time, nighttime fishing is best for tempting larger fish. As the water temperature cools in the fall, smallmouths return to more shallow water. Fall is the best time to catch a really big fish. When winter fishing on the river, there is only one thing to remember: Warmwater dis-





charges. A warmwater discharge dumps water into the river that is normally a higher temperature than the river water. The warmer water attracts baitfish. Look for pipes along the banks with water running out of them. On the coolest days, any discharge could be called a warmwater discharge.

## Where to fish

**339.** The city of Pittsburgh boat access is located off East Carson Street at River Front Park on the South side of Pittsburgh. River Front Park also has a handicapped fishing pier.

**344.** This is a private access at the Dock of the Bay (The Crow's Nest) in Sharpsburg. A fee is charged to launch at boat at this marina.

**345.** A private marina located at the end of 13th Street in Sharpsburg. A fee is charged to launch at boat at this marina.

**348.** Aspinwall Marina, located in Aspinwall, is private. A fee is charged to launch a boat at this marina.

For a list of all boat accesses on the Three Rivers, refer to the Fish & Boat Commission's "Fishing & Boating Map" or the "Southwest Regional Guide." You can order both of these publications by contacting the Commission at P.O. Box 67000, Harrisburg PA 17106, or online view and download the printable order form at the Commission's web site, [www.fish.state.pa.us](http://www.fish.state.pa.us). You can also view regional maps and access amenities by clicking "Online Maps" on the left side of the Commission web site's main page and then navigating to the area you want.

For shore-based anglers, easy access to the rivers can be gained by the bike trails that parallel the rivers. To find a printable map of the bike trails, visit: [www.friendsoftheriverfront.org](http://www.friendsoftheriverfront.org).

## Shore-fishing hotspots

**Point State Park.** Point State Park is located at the "Point," the confluence of the Three Rivers in downtown Pitts-

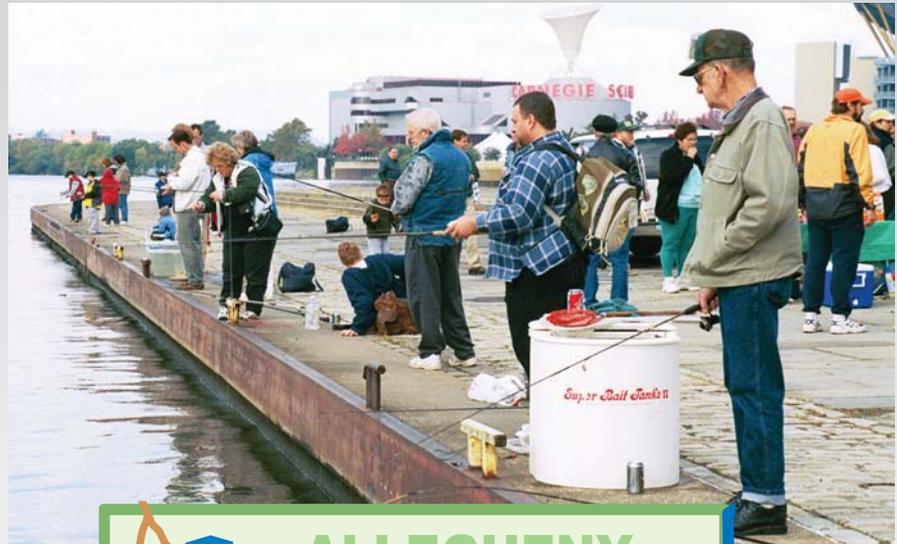
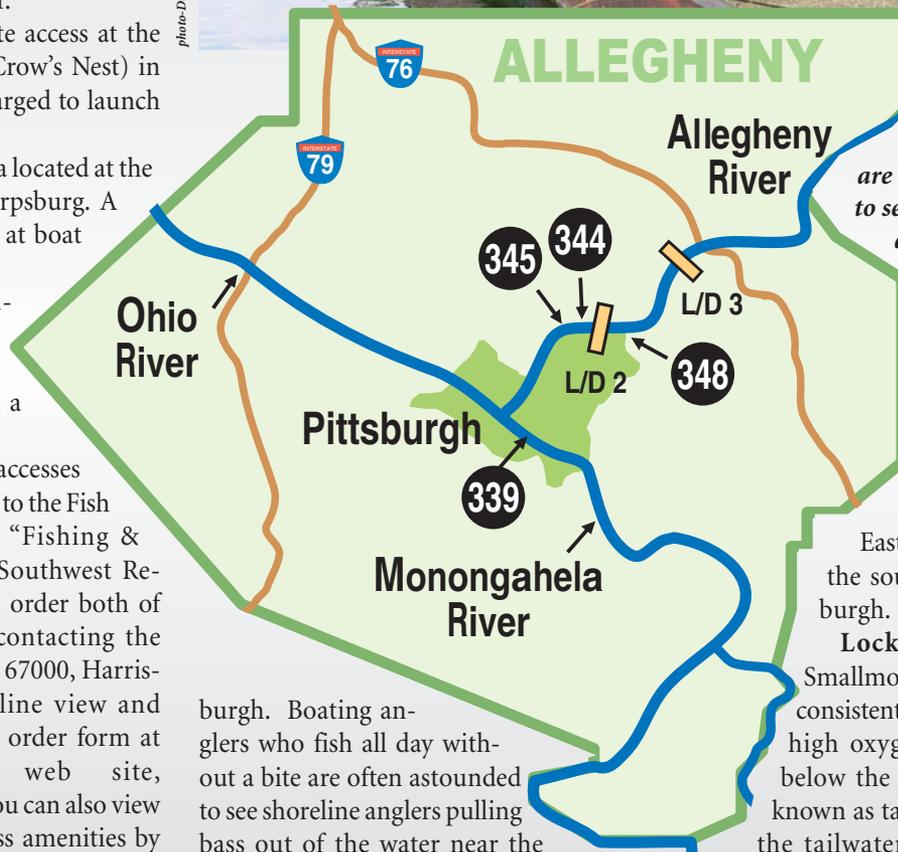


photo: Dennis Tubbs



*Boating anglers who don't do so well are often astounded to see shoreline anglers pulling bass out of the water near the Point.*

18th Street off East Carson Street on the south side of Pittsburgh.

**Locks and dams.** Smallmouth bass love the consistent temperature and high oxygen levels found below the locks and dams, known as tailwaters. Fishing the tailwaters of any of the

locks and dams can produce the largest bass in the area. Many of these spots are accessible by road and have designated fishing areas. Look for the signs to the lock and dam access areas. Be sure to observe all security measures.

**North shore.** Fishing the north shoreline between the stadiums, Heinz Field and PNC Park, has produced nice bass catches but not large numbers of fish.

**River Front Park.** From June through early September, River Front Park is rarely without a shoreline angler because it is one of the most productive spots in the city. The park is located on

lock and dam access areas. Be sure to observe all security measures.

- **Emsworth Lock and Dam** on the Ohio River are located just northwest of Pittsburgh off PA Route 65. The dam is 6.3 river miles downriver from the Point.

- **Lock and Dam #2** on the Allegheny River at Sharpsburg are located northeast of Pittsburgh off PA Route 28. The dam is 6.7 river miles upriver from the





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of the bridge piers and the creek mouth. This area is good for using crankbaits and slowly drifting live bait below the piers.

When using sonar to locate fish, look for variations in the bottom contour. After finding a hole or dip, fish the area by working your lure into deeper water from the upriver side. Bucktail jigs have been successful when using this technique.

### Catch and release

Catch-and-release angling has been a significant factor in the recovery of the Three Rivers bass fishery. Anglers should release fish as quickly as possible, keeping them above water only just long enough to take a picture. To estimate the weight of your catch, visit the Commission's web site and view or print the smallmouth bass part of the Commission's "Weight-Length Estimator." This will make it possible for you to estimate the weight with a quick measurement of your fish. ☐

Point. The best fishing at this dam is on the Route 28 side, not near the lock chambers.

• **Lock and Dam #3** on the Allegheny River at Cheswick are located northeast of Pittsburgh off Freeport Road. To reach Freeport Road, take PA Route 28 north from Pittsburgh and exit onto Freeport Road at the Harmar exit. Turn left, north, to the lock and dam. The dam is 14.5 river miles upriver from the Point. The best fishing is just off Freeport Road at the dam. Parking is available just above the river. This parking area is privately owned; please park at the end of the area.

### Hotspots for boat anglers

The key to success for boat anglers is moving water. Smallmouth bass prefer the downriver side of bridge piers and the mouth of feeder streams. Bass favor the moving water. Look between the downriver flow and the return up-flow in these areas and cast your lure in the "seam."

**Chartiers Creek.** The creek mouth is on the Ohio River 2.25 miles downstream of the Point. As you boat down the Ohio River, stay to the left of Brunot Island, the first island on the Ohio River. The mouth of Chartiers Creek will be on your left, the river's south side. This spot is great when the water is high and fish move out of the main river.

**Back channel of Davis Island.** Davis is the second island on the Ohio River on the left side of the main channel. Be careful when entering the back channel because the opening is shallow. The opening is a nice flat to fish in the spring. Farther down the back channel there are enticing rocky banks with overhanging brush—great places to jig and flip a worm.

**Back channel Washington's Landing.** Washington's Landing is the first island you encounter when traveling up the Allegheny River. The island is 2 miles upstream of the Point. Motor into the channel at a no-wake speed and look out for rowers. The rowing club docks are located in the channel. This area is also nice to fish in high water. The upper channel opening is very shallow. The safest way in and out of the channel is by using the downriver opening.

**Six Mile Island.** Yes, this island is 6 miles from the Point, and it is the second island on the Allegheny River. Fish the upper point just below Lock and Dam #2. The biggest fish have come from the back side of the island point, just across from the marina.

**Glenwood Highway Bridge/Streets Run.** From the south side boat access turn right, upriver, and motor to the third bridge. This is the Glenwood Bridge, and the mouth of Streets Run is on the left shore. Fish the downriver side



### More Resources

- Navigation charts of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers are available from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Pittsburgh District. Details are available online at [www.lrp.usace.army.mil/nav/navcharts.htm](http://www.lrp.usace.army.mil/nav/navcharts.htm), or contact the Corps at: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Pittsburgh District, 2032 William S. Moorhead Federal Building, 1000 Liberty Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15222-4186; (412) 395-7500. The main web site address is [www.lrp.usace.army.mil](http://www.lrp.usace.army.mil).

- You'll find a wealth of information on fish, fishing and boating in Pennsylvania on the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's web site, [www.fish.state.pa.us](http://www.fish.state.pa.us).

