

In Search of Allegheny Bronze

By Darl Black

photos by the author

In the chilled waters of late fall and early winter, there is a treasure of bronze awaiting anglers.

I'm not one for holiday shopping in over-crowded stores, so November's Black Friday has long been a dedicated day of fishing for me. A couple years back when fellow *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater* contributor Jeff Knapp suggested we go walleye fishing on the free-flow section of the Allegheny River on that day after Thanksgiving, I was all in.

Several days earlier, a storm had dumped 15-inches of snow across northwest Pennsylvania. But moderating temperatures resulted in a quick melt off—which in turn pushed river levels very high and turned the greenish flow to coffee-with-cream.

"A dirty river may not be the best for walleye fishing," remarked Jeff as we launched his jet boat. "However, with this high flow, there will be perfect fish-holding eddies formed below fast-water chutes and riffles. The walleye bite was strong last week on chubs and suckers. We should manage to catch some walleye today."

But after a couple hours of back-trolling current seams with our hand-picked selection of indigenous preyfish, it seemed obvious that walleye were not interested in feeding. Desiring to do something different, I picked up my other spinning outfit on which the obligatory tube jig was tied.

I fired a cast towards the shoreline, overshot my mark and the jig landed in the tall grass on the shore. I popped the jig into the water and pulled it about two feet. As it fell, I felt an unexpected bump. My tardy hookset failed to connect.



Delayed ice-up of Allegheny River is providing excellent smallmouth bass fishing into winter.

But on the next cast, I was ready. When the line twitched, I immediately responded with a rod sweep securely buttoning the fish to the hook. Expecting it to be a walleye, my jaw dropped when a nearly 3-pound smallmouth blasted out of the water.

After several zigzagging runs and another jump, followed by a dogged pull for deep water, I worked the fish to the side of the boat and Jeff slipped a net under the fish.

“High, muddy, cold water and you catch a smallie in less than 2 feet of water! Bet you can’t do that again,” said Jeff.

The next cast was a repeat of the previous one, only this smallie was easily over three pounds. That sent Jeff scrambling to tie on a tube jig.

In the next 45 minutes, we landed and released 15 bass between 2-3/4 and 3-1/2 pounds along a 30-yard section of steep bank. Then, we began expanding our search for other spots. We landed 10 more bass, with every fish being caught in less than 3-feet of water. Surprised by the number of aggressive smallmouth as well as their extreme shallow locations, it was only natural that more investigation was needed.

For years, I fished the Allegheny River for smallmouth well into the late fall, catching bass from slow-moving dredge holes, big eddies or pool areas as water temperature fell from the low 50s into the upper 40s. By the time the water temperature hit the mid 40s at these sites, I would be catching more walleye than smallmouth.

But with our Black Friday adventure, the thought crossed my mind that we may be missing out on a lot of late season bassin’ fun. So over the next couple seasons, fishing buddies and I tackled the river with a new perspective, fishing for smallmouth in what some may consider the wrong places for winter fish. Wow, do I love field work.

Today, I have a somewhat different game plan for late fall and winter river bronzesbacks. This is a pattern for the free-flow Allegheny River between Warren and East Brady; smallies in the Susquehanna and Delaware watersheds may respond differently due to river cool-down rates and other influences.

Live bait not needed

The remnants of partially digested prey remaining in the livewell after holding bass for photos lead me to scrutinize the long-standing belief that baitfish (minnows, shiners and such) are the primary diet component for smallmouth during the entire coldwater period.

There is little doubt that initially in the fall (October into November) river smallmouths demonstrate a clear preference for indigenous baitfish. Bass can be observed chasing baitfish in the riffles, and baitfish-type lures score best for anglers. So, it seemed logical to assume that preyfish would continue to be the choice for bass

through the balance of the coldwater period. Therefore, presentation emphasis was always live minnows or minnow-imitating lures.

But after recent seasons on the river, I now am skeptical that all river smallmouth target live minnow prey when temperatures dip below the mid 40s. In side-by-side fishing of selected artificial lures versus live minnow prey (chubs, suckers and shiners), jigs easily caught more smallmouth—a lot more. Those lure vs. live minnow experiments along with regurgitated prey in the livewell, have convinced me there are lots of smallies focusing on another food source in cold water.

What were the bass eating? From late November through early April the regurgitated prey present in livewells has been crayfish. Rarely any indication of a minnow, but lots of crayfish bits.

Suddenly, it fell into place why particular lures were so much more successful than others. Crawfish-imitating jigs scored practically every smallmouth caught in the truly coldwater period. A fat 3-1/2 inch tube jig simply overwhelms all other lures when the water is dingy. Smaller profile tubes and hair jigs have the edge when the water is clear.





With water temperatures in the 40s, anglers who are willing to contend with cold weather and unpredictable river flows can find action throughout the free-flow section of the Allegheny.

Whenever I or my boat partner worked a suspending jerkbait or slow-rolled a spinnerbait, only northern pike were caught. Deadsticking soft jerkbaits—a minnow-imitating technique so effective with water temperatures in the 50s and high 40s—only drew the occasional strike when water temperature was in the low 40s.

Further evidence involves productive color schemes. Dark-colored tubes and hair jigs produced far better than lighter hues that would typically represent baitfish. Black or brown hair caught more bass than white hair jigs. In tubes, green-pumpkin, dark watermelon, pumpkin pepper, black and purple outfished colors like pearl, clear sparkle, shad and smoke.

Fish more than pools

Most experienced river anglers recognize a smallmouth's fondness for relating to riffles and fast flows during the summer since current is their food delivery service. Serious brozeback anglers also recognize that as water temperature drops below 50-degrees, river bass seek quiet, slack water for the winter.

I always associated the move to quiet water with somewhat deeper water, too. In past years, I typically focused my efforts on depths from 6- to 12-feet in slow or slack water—and caught bass. When the bite tapered off, I figured it was simply too cold for bass to take in food on a regular basis.

However, in the last few seasons, I have come to realize that slack water does not have to be deep in order to hold bass during the late fall and winter. Nor does the area need to be a large eddy, dredge hole or pool.

The aggressive bass we found were located in relatively shallow shoreline pocket eddies—sites that provide slack water, but may be no larger than a table top and no deeper than three or four feet. Holding sites for these smallmouths are small eddies formed by a couple of shoreline rocks.

During our best day in mid-December of 2007, with water temperature at 43 degrees, three of us boated 150 smallmouth bass from shoreline pocket eddies immediately adjacent to a powerful, surging flow. Only a handful of those fish were taken at a depth greater than 3 feet.

Adjust to changing water level

Up to the point when sections of the river start to ice over, the Allegheny is in a constant state of flux. Rain or snow

melt will increase the flow, push the level higher and create dingy water. Then, during a drier period, the flow drops and the water returns closer to the green tint which walleye anglers prefer for fishing. Water temperature also bounces up and down based on run-off and air temperature.

We have enjoyed surprising success on smallmouth under dingy, high water conditions (within reason of course). These crawfish-hunting bass hug the banks as the water rises. Then, with falling water, bass drop back, staying within pocket eddies as long as these slackwater areas exist. Only if the mini eddies disappear due to unusually low water flow will these bass seek sanctuary in deeper areas.

The caveat tacked onto the dingy, high water success scenario is that when the river turns from coffee-with-cream to dark chocolate color, smallmouth bass are practically impossible to catch.

Water temperature crucial

For years, I thought fall smallmouth fishing on a river was very good from about 55- to 48-degrees. Nowa-

days, I'm looking at awe-some catches as water temperature drops from 45- to around 40-degrees.

During the coldwater period, we've caught smallmouth under sunny skies and cloudy skies, during snowstorms and dry high pressure. The numbers vary considerably from 10 to 100 smallmouths—but we always caught bass. Thirty to fifty fish would typically be caught during a 6- to 7-hour fishing session. At this time of year, it seems daily weather conditions do not impact fishing success as much as water temperature.

However, below the 40-degree mark, the number of strikes diminishes substantially. By 38-degrees, bass in the shoreline pocket eddies either stop feeding or move. But if a warming trend pushes the water back up to 40-degrees or above, the bite is back on.

I do not believe every smallmouth in a river will be doing the same thing during the coldwater period. Certainly, there are bass which winter-over in somewhat deeper holes and creek mouths. Certainly, some portion of the smallmouth population target baitfish through the winter. However, at the same time, there is a substantial segment of the river bass population pursuing crayfish along the shoreline as water rises and recedes. And, they remain surprisingly aggressive in cold temperatures. □



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