

Coldwater **Bite** on the Allegheny

by *Darl Black*

photos by the author

Late October through early December is a magic time on the Allegheny River. Experienced river rats know what I mean. This period has the most reliable action for the widest variety of quality sized gamefish—walleyes, smallmouth bass, northern pike and muskies.

As colorful fall foliage and fair weather give way to stark brown hillsides and cold temperatures, hardcore anglers are anxious to hit the river. Many days, you'll need to bundle up and pull the stocking cap over your ears to stay warm. But, a little discomfort is worth the likely rewards. At this time of the year, you can never be certain exactly what might bite on the next cast. Some anglers will focus on a single species, but others will simply roll with the punches and tackle whatever is hitting.

For example, several years ago, fishing friend Bob Hornstrom and I set off for a day of walleye fishing on the river over Thanksgiving holiday. The river was running bank full—meaning water covered the smaller grass islands and low spots along the shoreline but not above the defined hard lip on high banks.

At our first stop—a tailing current seam below an island—we caught several walleyes before the bite soured. Next, on our schedule was a dredge hole where I anticipated a current break along a submerged grass island, which I thought would be holding enough walleyes for both of us to finish our limits.

As it turned out, that particular seam held more than walleyes. Over the next couple hours, we brought a mixed bag of fish to the boat—a dozen walleyes, two large suckers, several smallmouth bass, including a 4-pounder, a 15-pound carp, a 20-pound channel catfish and a 38-pound musky. We caught over 100 pounds of fish by making repeated drifts on one current break.

Setting the stage

Granted, that kind of success does not happen every day in the fall. But, the opportunity for a memorable mixed-bag catch is greater during this time frame than any other time. It's the combination of water temperature, water flow and water color that create the magic bite.

When the water temperature drops below 50 degrees F, walleyes begin feeding more aggressively. Smallmouth bass shift from their summer haunts into faster current areas to slower moving water for the winter. Northern pike follow baitfish from the shallow browning weedbeds to somewhat deeper water. As a top-line predator, muskies pretty much go where they want to go, but it's likely where the largest concentration of food is located. With baitfish and predators gravitating to slower, moderate-strength current sections, a perfect storm is brewing.

Typically in the late fall, the water volume within the river is greater than it's been all summer. High water positions feeding fish in newly formed current seams and shoreline pocket eddies, where prey such as chubs and shiners are holding.

Increased water also means more color in the river—a plus for angling success. When the water is too clear, gamefish are more wary. On the other hand, muddy water can impede success. Allegheny River anglers like to see a greenish tint to the water—typically referred to as walleye green.

Anglers pitch their presentations

“I really love fishing the Allegheny River all year but especially in the late fall,” says river rat Rob Genter of Tidioute, Warren County. “All species are grouped up in defined areas, especially smallmouth bass that have been all over the river. It's not uncommon to catch bass, walleyes and a couple of pike or a musky from the same deep current break or eddy.”

Genter's number one lure for smallmouth bass at this time of the year is a 3.5-inch tube jig with a 1/8- or 1/4-ounce insert head. The preferred tube body color is some shade of brown or green. “A tube jig is particularly deadly for smallmouth

bass,” notes Genter. “While a tube will catch any species of fish in the river, it may not be the best choice for every species.”

Therefore, when his focus is walleyes, Genter goes to live bait. He traps creek bait (chubs and shiners) from tributary streams and keeps them in a stream live box, transferring only what he needs for a day of fishing to an aerated bait container.

“I use a leadhead jig painted either black or chartreuse and dress it with a 4-inch to 6-inch creek chub or shiner,” explains Genter. “As with a tube jig for bass, I cast the jig-n-minnow to a current seam or eddy hole and work it slowly along the bottom as it drifts with the river flow. The jig-n-minnow approach is best for pike and muskies, too. Simply go with a large hook in your jig and a bigger chub—something in the 6- to 8-inch range.”

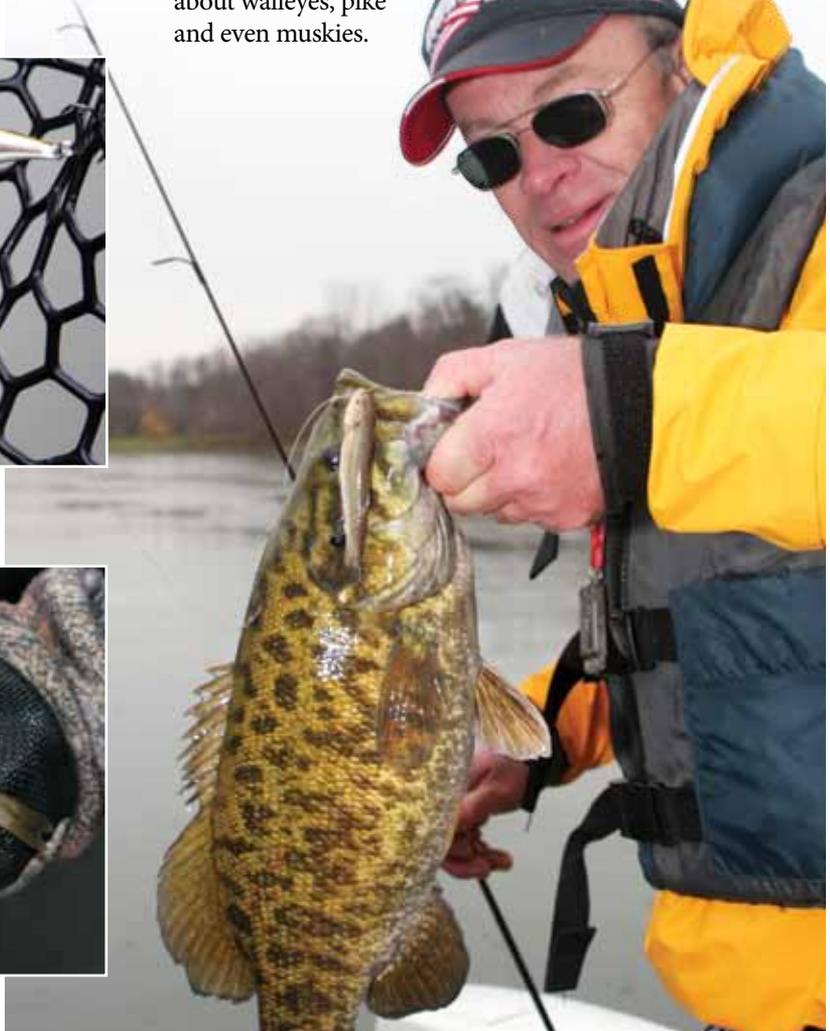
Another life-long river rat is Dale Black of Oil City, introduced to Allegheny River fishing by his father. Most of the year, Dale is all about smallmouth bass. But like Rob, when the colder water triggers the magic bite, Dale gets excited about walleyes, pike and even muskies.



In cold water, suspending jerkbaits are effective for river bass, pike, walleyes and even muskies.



When focusing on walleyes, many river rats prefer live bait caught in tributary streams.



Late fall is a magic time on the Allegheny River. During this time, in-the-know anglers look forward to catching larger fish of all species.



Pike are suckers for a 6- to 8-inch creek chub.

“In the fall, it may take a bit longer to find holding areas of gamefish. Smallmouth bass and pike are not as spread out in obvious places as they were during summer’s low water,” acknowledges Dale. “With greater water volume in the river, daily changes in the flow rate can reposition fish. But when you do find the right eddy pocket or offshore current break in a little deeper water, you will likely encounter quality-sized fish of every species. Sometimes, I’m simply blown away by impressive catches, which leaves me scratching my head as to where these big fish were during the summer.”

Dale always has the obligatory green pumpkin tube jig tied on anytime he fishes the Allegheny River. While most river anglers favor this tube for fall smallmouth bass, Dale finds a small, skirted jig dressed with a soft plastic craw bug to be even more productive for larger fish in the fall.

“I like a $\frac{3}{16}$ - to $\frac{5}{16}$ -ounce weedguard jig with a darker skirt and crayfish colored soft plastic, because I’ve hooked-and-landed and hooked-and-lost some pretty impressive walleyes, bass, pike and muskies with this little bait. One of my most memorable days was five walleyes over 5-pounds in five casts. That’s one for the record books. I pretty much fish the jig-n-trailer in the same way as most anglers fish a tube—cast it out, count it down to the bottom and slow roll it back to the boat as the current pushes it downstream.”

When you check Dale’s rods on deck, along with a tube and skirted jig, you will find a suspending jerkbait

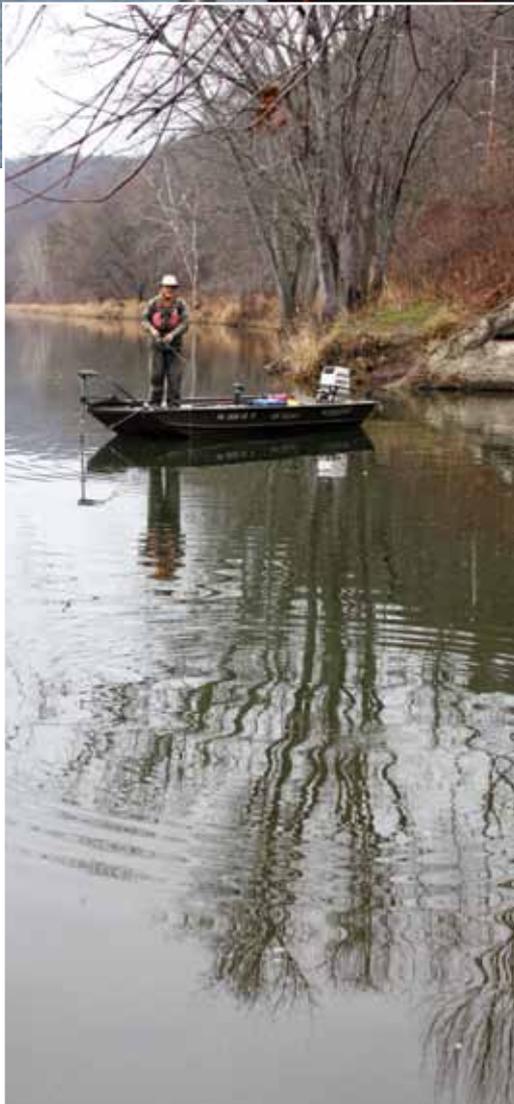
Most anglers believe a jig-n-minnow combo triggers more walleyes and northern pike to bite than just a jig alone.



During the late fall, Dale Black prefers a skirted jig with a trailer for smallmouth bass, walleyes and pike.



Late fall is the best time to catch a musky in the Allegheny River.



...tied on one. “While smallmouth bass are sometimes in the mood for a suspending jerkbait, these long minnow lures are particularly effective on walleyes and northern pike during this time of year. Cast it out to an eddy or slow water over rocks, crank the bait down to maximum depth and stop. Let the jerkbait hang at the depth and drift slowly with the current. Give it a little twitch or pull every so often. Watch the line for unexpected movement and be ready to set the hook.”

Don't forget hair

When I hit the Allegheny River in the late fall, I will have a rod with each of the following lures tied on—tube jig, skirted jig with craw trailer, suspending jerkbait and jig-n-minnow. Plus one more, a hair jig.

Some anglers tip a hair jig with a creek minnow. However, I'm on the side of those who believe a quality handcrafted hair jig should be fished on its own merits. I use jigs tied with a combination of hair, feathers, rabbit fur and tinsel on occasion. The correctly tied natural hair jig will undulate in current without being moved by the angler, appearing as a living creature even when sitting on the bottom.

When water temperature approaches the low 40s, I firmly believe it's time to add hair to the arsenal. My retrieve is very slow, either a steady bottom-hugging swimming retrieve or a pull-pause retrieve.

When fishing tube jigs, I rely basically on crayfish-like colors. However, with hair, I include a wider array of colors that includes more baitfish hues. Of course, there are black and brown/orange in my hair box, but you'll also find olive, gray, dirty yellow, white and even chartreuse. ☐