

Midsummer River Smallmouth Bass Tactics





Rainy and cloudy days often provide better action throughout the length of the day.

by Jeff Knapp photos by the author

Consistently catching summertime river smallmouth bass—when foods supplies are abundant and water conditions can range from low/clear to high/muddy—demands a collection of versatile tactics.

Midsummer often provides some of most enjoyable and productive river smallmouth bass fishing of the year. The weather is mild, and the fish feed aggressively. However, it can also be challenging. Typically, midsummer is a time of plenty. Smallmouth bass have ample choices including various minnows and aquatic bugs as well as the quintessential bronzeback fare, the crayfish. The offering you show the fish has a lot of strong competition of the natural sort.

Additionally, river flows during the summertime are often low and clear. To be successful, your lure needs to trigger a bite or reaction strike and must provide the bass with a real good look. About the time you get the low-and-clear thing figured out, the thunderstorms roll in, raising the river a foot or two, destroying its clarity. It's time to make adjustments again.

Fog

During those clear, stable-weather nights of midsummer, river valleys often fill in with fog, causing a cloak that temporarily shields the water from the burning rays of the sun in the morning hours. Coupled with the morning action provided by the natural feeding activity, it pays to be on the water at the crack of dawn.

Naturally, safety is the first consideration, particularly if you're fishing from a boat. In the middle Allegheny River stretches I fish, there are quality areas near boat access areas, places that can be fished without even firing up the outboard. It's just a matter of launching the boat, dropping the trolling motor and drifting with the current while firing casts to likely spots. Wait to navigate under power until later in the morning, when it's safe to do so.

Though there's not always that hot, early to mid-morning "fog bite," usually it's present, so be prepared to have things slow down noticeably when the fog burns off. It's often like having a switch thrown to the off position. The bass aggressively feed during the low-light period of early morning, conditions that give them an advantage over their prey.

Happily, this shut-down period usually only lasts for a couple of hours. The water is warm, and bass metabolism is high. So, they must feed. During a typical summer day, the fish get more active by early afternoon.

Rainy day (not so) blues

As I prepared the boat for the guide trip, my two clients discussed the prospects for the day's action. One, an occasional angler, commented on the weather forecast of a cloudless summer day. "Looks like it will be a perfect day," he said. His brother-in-law and partner for the adventure, a serious angler from the Deep South who fishes 12 months of the year, responded, "Yeah, for golf." And even though I don't golf, his comment echoed my thoughts.



When the water is low and clear, hard jerkbaits are often the answer for teasing smallmouth bass to hit.

Some of the most productive summertime river bass fishing happens during those rainy, summertime days. The ones where it never really pours, but the rain gear stays on all day. It's the kind of day many folks shy away from, waiting instead for better weather. As with the fog pattern, the lower light intensity of such conditions seems to allow bass to feed more efficiently.

One area that consistently produces bass for me during rainy summertime days—when the water is still low and clear—is the tailout section of a major river hole. The tailout is the transition zone, where the pool shallows before it spills into a riffle area, and it's a classic feeding spot. Depths run from 1 to 3 feet. The best tailout areas feature a combination of rocks and aquatic grass, places that provide ambush points. Bass use tailouts during twilight feeding periods. During rainy days, bass often stay there all day.

Be a jerk

In summer's warm water, river bass are accustomed to chasing down their meals. Anglers reap the benefit of using a moving lure instead of fishing one that must be worked more slowly along the bottom. The most effective moving lures are often the ones that are fished in a jerky spot-and-go manner.

Jerkbaits exist in both hard and soft versions. Though each has a place in summertime river bass fishing, I've found that hard jerkbaits are the go-to choice most of the time.

Hard jerkbaits have the ability to attract the attention of bass but not give them so close a look that they turn away. The secret in working a jerkbait in the summer is to really work it. Impart aggressive, hard jerks. Then, stop the bait for just an instant. I don't know if you can actually annoy bass, but that's the human emotion you're going for here.

Go with soft jerkbaits when weeds are present, and come close to the surface. The previously mentioned tailout situation is a perfect example.

You can't work the soft jerkbait as aggressively. It will just skip across the surface, but that's not necessary. Bass hiding in weed depressions are often actively feeding and don't need to be teased into biting. They simply rise up and intercept the lure as it comes by.

Go with the flow

River fish differ from their lake-dwelling counterparts by having to adapt to changing flow levels. To be a successful summertime smallmouth bass angler, you must adjust as well.

Take for instance, summertime rain and thunderstorms that elevate and cloud the water. While I don't want to fish in a raging flow the color of chocolate milk, I savor the chance to fish cloudy water when the river comes up a foot or two, spills into the shoreline grass but still has 6-to-12 inches of clarity. That's when the spinnerbaits, soft swimbaits and rattlebaits come out. Expect bass to be right on shore (or up against island edges) and on the feed. Show them something big, noisy and flashy, and expect to catch a bunch of big smallmouth bass.

When the water is low, clear and warm, river bass will be off the banks, particularly during the non-peak feeding times of midday. During such conditions, bass have the run of the river. They don't have to hug the bank to escape strong current. I've caught bass over mid-river runs that are over 5 feet deep, fish that have taken a hard jerkbait fished well over their heads. They can see a long way when the water's clear.

When things are really slow, you can often hook a few bass by bringing the lure down to them. Crayfish imitating soft plastics, tipped on a skirted jig or Texas-rigged on a wide gap hook, are fairly snag resistant and usually trigger bites from bass when they get a case of summertime laziness. ☐