



# Fall Tributary Bass

*by John Allen*

*photos by the author*

There's no denying it. A smallmouth bass can put up the best pound-for-pound fight of any fish in Pennsylvania. As water temperatures cool in the fall, the bite will heat up. If you do not own or have access to a boat, taking advantage of the hot bite on one of the famous smallmouth rivers in the state can be quite challenging. Regardless of where you are in Pennsylvania, there is a tributary creek to one of these rivers with an excellent smallmouth bass population nearby. In most of these creeks, the bass get just as big as they would in the rivers that they flow into. If you are planning to try your hand at locating bass in these creeks, you should know the most practical ways to access the water, where the bass are located and the best ways to catch them.

## Access

For a lot of tributary creeks, you can locate access points by looking on a map where bridges cross the creek. As long as the land is of public ownership, you can access the creek. If the stream runs through private land, you should always obtain permission from the landowner before accessing the waterway by their property. Most landowners will allow a courteous angler to access the stream. If not, just move on to the next potential access area.

If the stream is navigable, I will use a canoe or kayak, so I can fish only the best stretches and quickly skip over the shallow, unproductive waters. I will usually only use

this method if I have someone with me, and we are able to find a second access area to park another vehicle in order to shuttle ourselves. If the stream is one that I'm already familiar with, I normally park my kayak or canoe about 20 to 30 yards prior to the fishing hole. Then, I walk along the shoreline to the fishing hole, so I don't disturb any fish before I cast to them. If you're careful, you can ease up along the edge of the fishing hole with the kayak or canoe in the main current, giving yourself extra time to see if it's worth getting out while limiting the amount of fish that you will potentially disturb.

## Locations

Once you've obtained access and know how you're going down the creek, you need to figure out where the bass are hanging out. During the fall months in these creeks, the bass tend to hang around structures such as downed trees, bridge piers and in the deeper holes of the creek. Depending on the creek, a deeper hole may only be a few feet deep, or it may be so deep that you cannot see bottom. As the fall days get colder, the bass will begin to bunch up in only the very deepest parts of a stretch while vacating the structures. If you're fishing the creek for the first time, you will spend a good portion of the time trying to locate these hot spots. Once you have been to the creek and know where everything is located, the next time through will be much easier and probably more productive.





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## Tactics

Now that you have access to their locations and know where to look for bass, it's time to gear up and go after them. I normally use a medium action 6 or 6½ foot spinning rod with 8- or 10-pound-test line, depending on the structure that I'm fishing around. If I'm fishing in areas with a lot of downed tree tops or root balls, I tend to go heavier. I may even go with 12-pound-test line or use braided line to keep from breaking fish off.

When it comes to tackle, crankbaits, jerkbaits, tube jigs and plastic grubs are all excellent choices. For crankbaits and jerkbaits, I tend to go with larger lures than I use in the spring or summer. At this time, baitfish are at their largest average size, and the bigger baits tend to produce bigger fish. The one downside to fishing these tributary streams is there are a lot of first- or second-year bass that will be more than eager to go after your bait. By using baits in larger sizes, you will keep them off of your line. When it comes to color selection, I will almost always go with a natural color lure. If the water is a bit off color, I will usually carry a few "clown" or "firetiger" colored baits.

For tube jigs and plastic grubs, I tend to lean towards the more natural colors as well. I usually go with 4-inch baits for both types of soft plastics. When fishing the creeks with a canoe or kayak, I tend to keep the tube jigs off my line until I park at the fishing hole. Although they are very effective from a watercraft, they have the tendency to get caught up in rocky creek bottoms. With the other three suggested baits; you can constantly keep them moving through the water, allowing you to cover more water as you float along.



*During the fall on creek tributaries, bass tend to hang around structures such as downed trees, bridge piers and in deeper holes.*

When I find a potential hot spot, I always try to work myself along the edge of the stream bank in order to get to the center of the fishing hole, so I can cover as much of the fishing hole as possible with each cast. As I enter the top of the fishing hole, I will complete a basic cast and retrieve with an occasional rod tip twitch until I reach the center of the fishing hole. Then, I will follow up my twitches with a few pauses to give the fish a chance to go up and grab the bait.

If you're unable to fish the big rivers this fall, take a shot at fishing one of the river's tributary creeks. You may be surprised at what you find. ☐