

LATE SEASON LUNKERS

by Jeff Woleslagle

photos by the author

It was a very cool late fall morning, and a good friend and I were anchored and positioned among a half dozen other boats. It was no secret that the fish were biting. As a slight fog lifted off the water, I hooked a live shiner through the lips on a 1/8-ounce jig head and casted it into the current, allowing it to drift toward the bottom. The bait never made it there as it was slammed by an 18-inch Smallmouth Bass. I knew right away that it was going to be a great day on the water and was it ever. By the time we had exhausted our bait supply, we had landed and released close to 20 Smallmouth Bass and 37 Walleyes. When the weather starts to turn colder and frost becomes a normal occurrence, many turn their attention to hunting and football games. Those who don't spend time on the water are missing out on some of the best fishing of the year. As the water starts to cool, the fish recognize the need to feed heavily before winter dormancy sets

The author caught and released a late season Smallmouth Bass that hit a live shiner. The weather was cold, but the fishing was hot.



A live Fallfish can easily get the attention of large Smallmouth Bass, Walleyes and Muskellunge late in the season.





This late season Walleye was taken on the Juniata River with a live shiner on a jig head.

A large shiner on a 1/8-ounce jig head can be a great late season choice.

in. It can be prime time to catch a true lunker Smallmouth Bass, Walleye or Muskellunge, and live bait is a great way to catch them.

While I am a firm believer that the best time to fish is any time you have the opportunity, I have often found that late in the season some of the best action happens at mid-day. When the sun hits the water and the temperature increases a few degrees, the fish go into active feeding.

My rule for fishing during late fall and early winter is generally to slow down my presentations. I like to use large live shiners and Creek Chubs hooked through the lips on 1/8-ounce jig heads. I will go up to 1/4-ounce jig heads if it is windy or if the current is strong, and I am having trouble contacting the bottom. Some days, the bite will be subtle, a slight tap on the line indicating the strike. Other days, the bites are so aggressive that an angler doesn't even need to set the hook. As for Walleyes, nightcrawlers work late in the season, but they don't seem as effective after November. Try them on the downstream side of bridge abutments behind rigged-on crawler harnesses.

I also like to fish Creek Chubs, Fallfish, large Fathead Minnows and shiners with a 1/4- to 1/2-ounce slip sinker above a barrel swivel with about a 2-foot leader tied to a number 4 or number 2 bait holder hook. I usually hook the baitfish through the bottom of the mouth and out the top of the head, but hooking them just below the dorsal fin can sometimes be more effective. The late fall is one time when I prefer to fish with large bait. For rod set-up, I like to use medium to medium-heavy spinning outfits in the 7-foot range. I like to use fluorocarbon line in 10- or 12-pound-test for my leader because of its low visibility in the water. If I am fishing in an area where I know there is a good possibility of encountering a Muskellunge, I may step up to 20-pound test line.

The fish are often congregated at this time of year, so where you catch one you can expect others to be close by. A fishing friend of mine has a simple rule for finding large late season fish on rivers throughout Pennsylvania, "Just look for the deeper pools below the rocks, and you will find the fish." I like areas with large rocks or rock ledges that lead to deep river pools. The fish aren't generally cruising the shallows at this time of year but instead

stack up in deeper water where they don't have to move far to grab a meal. If I am fishing from the shore, I like to cast parallel to the pool. If I am fishing from a boat, I like to position myself toward the head of the pool and cast upstream, letting the bait tumble down through the hole. You can expect to lose a few rigs in a day of fishing, but it is often worth it to keep your baits close to the bottom.

Get your bait from the waters you will be fishing to prevent the spread of Aquatic Invasive Species. Always remember to wear your life jacket. It is mandatory at this time of year. Cold water quickly saps your energy should an accident occur. Don't let the colder weather deter you though from some of the best fishing of the season. Late fall and early winter can be a great time to employ live bait for your biggest fish of the year, so get out there to find a late season lunker. ☐

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