



Western Pennsylvania Smallmouth BASS FLOATS

by Ben Moyer

It could be argued that fishing for Smallmouth Bass while floating down a rocky, forest-lined river is Pennsylvania's signature angling experience. Coastal states have their tidal marshes and Redfish, and Minnesota lake country harbors Walleyes and Northern Pike, but Pennsylvania's uplifted landscape is the home of rivers, and those rivers are the home to Smallmouth Bass. It is likely that no other state offers more miles of flowing water Smallmouth Bass habitat than Pennsylvania. The Smallmouth Bass is a native fish in western Pennsylvania's upper Ohio Basin, and that region still offers some of the best float fishing for the bronze battlers. Below are some float fishing excursions within the Smallmouth Bass's original Pennsylvania range. Several of these streams represent success stories in water quality restoration, where sport fishing has improved greatly after past abuse.

In general, artificial lures or flies are a better choice for float fishing than live bait. Minnows and nightcrawlers can be deadly, but casting artificials that you don't have to freshen often makes it easier to hit that great looking spot that's quickly passing by with the current, when you have only enough time for one perfect cast.

On all these streams, a wide selection of lures or flies can be effective under various conditions. Consider stripping big streamers if you're a fly angler. Dead drifting large wet flies

that imitate hellgrammites or leeches can entice strikes too. With spinning gear, throw floating-diving minnow lures, weighted soft-plastic jigs of various colors or diving baits that imitate crayfish.

Youghiogheny River

The entire length of this big southwestern stream, primarily in Fayette County, offers good Smallmouth Bass fishing, but two sections are best suited to float fishing by anglers without the technical skill and equipment required to fish the churning "lower Yough," from Ohiopyle downstream to Connellsville.

Confluence to Ohiopyle

Nine miles of alternating milder rapids and "slack" current offer classic Smallmouth Bass fishing on the "middle Yough." On this section, closest to the Youghiogheny Dam and its coldwater outflow, target backwaters behind islands or slack water close to shore. Bass often feed there in the slightly warmer water. Don't be discouraged if the bite is slow until mid-morning, when the action often accelerates.

Float options are limited on this stretch, in fact there is only one. Put in at the Ramcat access on river left at Confluence, and take out at the Ohiopyle State Park take-out on river left just above the falls in Ohiopyle. Do not go

beyond the take-out. Rafts or dories specifically outfitted for fishing are the best craft, but you can fish the river from a canoe, especially if a stern paddler maneuvers the craft while the bow-partner casts.

Connellsville to Boston

“The Bottom Yough” as locals call it offers 40 miles of Smallmouth Bass habitat all the way to the Monongahela River. No threatening rapids confront boaters, but the current glides along past boulders and stone bridge pilings over a continuously rocky bottom. Riffles in some stretches offer structure and more predictable lies. Expect to find bass throughout the river here where temperatures are higher. Float options throughout this stretch are numerous. There is public river access for small craft at Connellsville (don't launch above the dangerous low-head dam at South Connellsville), Dawson, Perry Township, Whitsett, Smithton, Cedar Creek Park, West Newton, Suterville, Buena Vista and Boston. A private launch at Layton can be used with permission and a fee. The frequent access sites allow anglers to plan for shorter trips that allow time for thorough fishing.

*French Creek

Flowing southeastward off the glacial plateau of Erie and Crawford counties, this Allegheny River tributary's generally placid current is spiced with frequent structural elements likely to attract bass. Old pilings, bridge piers, riffles, boulder-eddies and current breaks below bars deposited at the mouths of tributaries are all good places to cast. For a first time fishing float, try the lower section below Meadville. Consider launching at Shaw's Landing or Wilson's Chutes, both accessible from Route 322, west of Franklin, and fishing downstream to the *Allegheny River confluence at Franklin. A private campground midway at Utica offers the option of breaking this trip into two days of serious fishing. Float-fishing the upper section, above Meadville, is also viable on adequate flows.

*Allegheny River

Many consider the Allegheny River the “destination” Smallmouth Bass fishery in western Pennsylvania and beyond. Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission surveys show an improving fishery with a notable increase in the size of bass in recent years, particularly in upstream stretches between Tionesta and Emlenton. Target casts toward boulders on this big water, either along the shoreline or at mid-current. Allegheny Smallmouth Bass also like to ambush prey at the foot of riffles, right where the fast current piles into a pool. Especially at lower flows, consider how your approach may startle fish and plan your maneuvers accordingly. Avoid plowing right into water you want to fish. Instead, steer away from likely looking cover, maintaining a distance you can reach with your cast. Access options are many. You can launch or take out at Tidioute, West Hickory,

Tionesta, President, Oil City, Franklin, Fisherman's Cove and Emlenton. A number of private campgrounds allow for overnight trips, some offering upstream or downstream shuttle service. If passing by or taking out at Oil City, be aware of the class II rapids beneath the Veterans Bridge, just upstream from the access ramp on river left. Inexperienced paddlers are advised to portage around this hazard.

*Clarion River

One of the most scenic Smallmouth Bass float fishing objectives in western Pennsylvania is the beautiful Clarion River, flowing over 100 miles from East Branch Dam in Elk County down to the Allegheny River just below Foxburg, Clarion County. Smallmouth Bass live throughout this section. One pleasing float among many alternatives is to launch at Hallton (River Mile 74) by SR 3002 (River Road) and fish down to Clarington (River Mile 59) or even Cooksburg (River Mile 50). The Allegheny National Forest occupies much of the river right shoreline throughout this section. Current along this “mid-river” stretch is nowhere threatening, but boulders, eddies, current seams and Smallmouth Bass enliven the entire route. For the longer trip to Cooksburg, the attractive riverside campground at Clear Creek State Park makes an ideal halfway overnight stopover.

A few simple common sense rules can keep float fishing fun and safe. Always wear a life jacket on float trips, always let someone know where you're going and when you plan to return, and always check river conditions before launching. Never attempt paddling maneuvers that you judge beyond your abilities. Otherwise, enjoy Pennsylvania's signature fishing option—floating our rivers for Smallmouth Bass. ☐

**This water is currently part of Pennsylvania's Best Fishing Waters Smallmouth Bass program (www.PaBestFishing.com).*



photos-courtesy of Ben Meyer

Plan float fishing trips to allow adequate time for serious fishing. Pull over on the bank to thoroughly fish promising water.