

Wading for Smallmouth Bass

by Darl Black

My Smallmouth Bass fishing roots are submerged in Pennsylvania streams and rivers.

During the mid-1960s, high school fishing buddy Bob Davis and I routinely fished the stretch of the Shenango River just downstream of the newly-constructed Shenango Dam near Sharpsville. It was here—near the old Erie Canal Lock—that I caught my first 20-inch Smallmouth Bass. The remarkable aerial show put on by that big bass set a path for a lifetime of Smallmouth Bass fishing.

Over the last five decades, Marilyn and I have enjoyed opportunities to fish for Smallmouth Bass in lakes, impoundments and flowing water across Pennsylvania. In the early days, we would wade-fish creeks, streams and meadow brooks— anywhere Smallmouth Bass may live.

Even when utilizing a canoe or kayak as a means of transportation on flowing waters, I learned that beaching the paddle craft and wading select areas improves your success. With feet firmly planted on the bottom, your casts are more accurate, strike detection is improved, and hooksets are far better than fishing from a drifting platform. More importantly, wading allows you to carefully study the water, scrutinizing both the flow and bottom contour for minor discrepancies that may hold bass.

About 20 years ago, I started fishing Pennsylvania's major rivers by jetboat. I enjoy the mobility of a shallow-water power craft. Initially, I saw my Smallmouth Bass catch rate climb. Like a tournament bass angler on a big lake, I could jump from



Pete Cartwright with an Allegheny River Smallmouth Bass.

prime spot to prime spot. But eventually, catches at easily identifiable spots were less spectacular as more and more anglers purchased jetboats.

A chance encounter with Pete Cartwright a couple of years ago led to a different perspective on how to more effectively fish Pennsylvania's rivers. Pete Cartwright is a "full-time" wader on big and small waters, having fished 32 different rivers and streams in Pennsylvania—including frequent summer visits to the middle section of the Allegheny River.

When we compared notes on the various facets of flowing water Smallmouth Bass fishing, we were in agreement. We both employ similar lures, rods and lines. For jigs and tube baits, we execute the same angled upstream cast with a downstream drift. We carry minimum tackle when wading and never keep fish. However, I no longer wade fish rivers but use a jetboat.

I joined him on the Allegheny River one summer day in order to take photographs for future river Smallmouth Bass articles. He chose a non-descript section of the river with easy shoreline access—an area I typically bypass when running in my jetboat, because it appears to lack visible current breaks, seams, pocket eddies or other cover to attract Smallmouth Bass.

But within 45 minutes, Cartwright caught several nice-sized Smallmouth Bass along with numerous smaller ones while moving no more than 50 yards. He accomplished this by carefully observing minor differences in surface disturbances and looking for shadowy areas on the bottom of the river. In other words, Stream Fishing 101—a basic lesson I had forgotten when I jumped from wading streams to jetboating on bigger flows.

Fortunately, Cartwright reminded me that fishing a river is no different than a small creek. “Slow down, study the water, and make every cast count” is his motto regardless of water size.

Wade fishing forces you to better assess your surroundings, and look for fish-holding water within a cast of your position. Getting outfitted for wading is less costly than purchasing a river boat or even a fishing kayak.

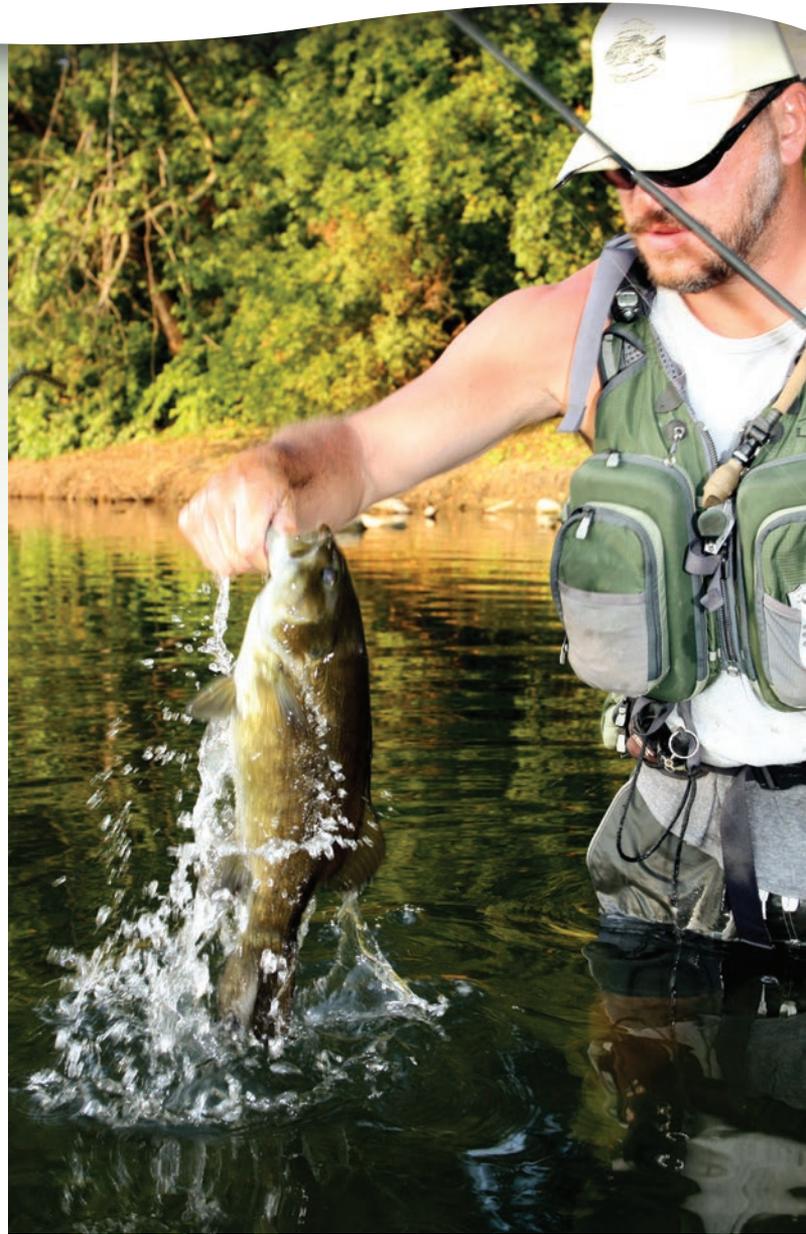
In addition to rod, reel and a handful of baits, the two most important items are a pair of wading boots and a wading staff. Chest waders are optional for summer. Wading boots should be of good quality with removable studs on the bottom of the boot. Properly fitted wading boots provide better support and traction than a pair of old tennis shoes.

Cartwright utilizes a fly angler chest pack to carry a day-long supply of baits, along with a first aid kit, sunscreen, insect repellent and drinking water. My wading jaunts are usually an hour or two in duration, so necessary tackle is carried in a small shoulder bag. I even know several Smallmouth Bass stream anglers who squeeze everything into a small utility case, which fits in a shirt pocket.

Assemble one or two spinning outfits, depending on your preferred waters. Choose a medium power 6½- to 7-foot rod spooled with 6- or 8-pound-test line to handle ½- to ¼-ounce baits for large creeks and rivers and a 6- to 6½-foot light power rod with 4- or 6-pound-test line for ¼- to ⅛-ounce lures in the skinny water of small streams.

Keep lures to a minimum, but be sure to have some jigs, tubes and stick worms to imitate crayfish and hellgrammites, floating minnow baits that can be twitched and ripped to represent injured preyfish, and a couple of your favorite spinners.

Just remember, to catch more flowing-water Smallmouth Bass, you have to get wet. ☑



Enjoy the experience of wading for Smallmouth Bass in Pennsylvania's streams and rivers.

photos-Darl Black



The arsenal of a stream and river Smallmouth Bass angler.