

# The Magic Zone



by Jeff Knapp    photos by the author

On this hot and humid mid-summer day, the coolness of the air-conditioned office was a welcome reprieve from having just washed my boat of the gritty evidence of a week of hard river fishing, a productive one where big Smallmouth Bass and Walleyes chased down our offerings. But no matter how good the recent action's been, I suppose it's human nature to look forward to what the next season holds.

While I appreciate what each phase of a 12-month calendar of fishing opportunities presents, there's something special about what I call "the Magic Zone," that time during the fall when the water temperature of my local river—the middle Allegheny River—falls into the mid 50-degree F range and continues a slow and steady descent

to around 40-degrees F. That zone has provided some of my most memorable river trips.

During early to mid-fall, river Smallmouth Bass and Walleyes are in transition, moving from the fast-current areas that provided necessary food and cover when the water was warm. Typically, by late October, Smallmouth Bass and Walleyes will be migrating to slower, deeper areas protected from the force of the river's current. The result is concentrations of fish in identifiable areas still on the feed.

Some years, things fall into place just right, like that of around 15 years ago. It was a Halloween weekend when my friend Dave Keith and I experienced an exceptional day on river Smallmouth Bass and Walleyes, a bite that lasted well into the darkness, especially for the Walleyes.

On the drive home that evening, I called fellow *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater* contributor Darl Black, who asked me to inform him if I got into some hot fall river



*A suspended jerkbait produced this 31-inch Allegheny River Walleye during a past Thanksgiving weekend.*

fishing. The following day, Black met up with me, and we landed 36 Smallmouth Bass in the 15- to 18-inch range in a few hours. The bass took 4-inch tube jigs fished on exposed insert-style jigheads—casted along the shallow edge of a major wintering hole. I doubt that any of the fish were deeper than 4- to 5-feet, though water in the 10- to 15-foot range was nearby.

That weekend was the start of the best late-fall river fishing I've experienced. November fishing was incredible, and Thanksgiving weekend fishing was incredible too. Not only were wintering holes productive, but it seemed that every shoreline pocket shielded from the current held biting bass. Bass hit tubes, hair jigs and twister-tail grubs. The weather stayed mild, and our river assault continued. Over Christmas Eve, with the water temperature in the low 40s, my boat and Black's boat accounted for an abundance of Smallmouth Bass. While time has dulled some of the details, I doubt if many were under 15 inches. During the second week of January, high water and winter finally arrived, putting the end to a remarkable 2-month stretch of river fishing.

Since then, I've enjoyed some excellent fall river fishing but nothing quite like that, at least not for such an extended time. Looking back, I suspect it was a "perfect storm" kind of thing. Not only was the weather mild through late fall and early winter, but the river had been quite high and muddy during much of September and October, perhaps limiting foraging opportunities for bass. When feeding conditions improved, bass made up for it.

While jig-style lures—tubes, hair jigs and grubs—are the mainstay of late fall river fishing, one should also have a suspending jerkbait, not only for Smallmouth Bass but Walleyes as well.

It was a Thanksgiving weekend when Dave Lehman and I were fishing the Allegheny River near West Hickory. Trucks loaded with folks headed for deer camp sped along Route 62 as we plied the protected water of an eddy, me with an olive-hued hair jig, Dave with a 4-inch suspending jerkbait that he worked ultra-slow.

I'd set the boat up for a drift that would end at the mouth of an incoming creek, along a 150-yard stretch of river that had the correct current and depth to hold Walleyes. Each drift produced several Walleyes, all of which were quality fish. It was a magical afternoon when the fish came regularly and kept increasing in size. Lehman capped the day with a 31-inch Walleye that pulled the scale to nearly 12 pounds.

Often, late fall bass and Walleyes respond best to a stop-n-go bait, like a jig subtly hopped along the bottom, or a suspending jerkbait twitched ever-so-slowly during the retrieve. But at times, fish go for a steady, slow-roll offering of a soft swimbait or spinnerbait.

It was late November of last year when Ron Kotwica and his daughter Victoria joined me. Arriving with them was a howling wind and a mix of rain and wet snow. Not the kind of weather conducive to working a finesse style bait. But the bass were cooperative, moving out from their rocky lairs to chase down 3.8-inch paddle tail swimbaits fished on ¼-ounce jigheads.

A week later, during one of my final river Smallmouth Bass outings, Jason Wagner and I worked shoreline pockets of protected water. Though cold out, the conditions were dry and calm. The bass did not like jigs and jerkbaits, yet crushed my soft paddle tail swimbaits and Jason's spinnerbaits. The bites weren't many, but the bass inhaled them. And all of them were big—18- to 20-inches. The water temperature was 40-degrees F.

Whether it lasts for 2 months or 2 weeks, the Magic Zone provides some of the finest river bass and Walleye fishing of the year. ☐



*Soft paddletail swimbaits saved a very cold, snowy day for Ron Kotwica and his daughter, Victoria.*