

# Cherry Picking Summertime River Smallmouth Bass



by Jeff Knapp     photos by the author

The Smallmouth Bass is known for its often aggressive nature. In the warm water of summer, its metabolism is in high gear. In free-flowing river systems, much of the Smallmouth Bass food supply is concentrated close to current areas at this time. Combine these factors, and it makes sense to target areas likely holding actively-feeding Smallmouth Bass, pick the low-hanging fruit and then move on to the next similar spot.

Free-flowing rivers feature a sequence of riffle-run-pool. Riffles, faster-flowing chutes located in areas of higher gradient, drain the deeper pool upriver. Riffles gradually flow into the slightly deeper and slower areas of the run. As the flow continues to deepen, it takes on the character of the pool, which eventually tails-out before spilling into the next riffle, completing the chain.

While this is a general depiction, influenced by the topography of a river, within a free-flowing river there is slow water and fast water. At this time of year, actively feeding Smallmouth Bass, the ones looking for food (hence easiest to catch), are typically near the fast stuff—the riffles and upper ends of runs.

What follows is a look at three tactics employing soft swimbaits, hard suspending jerkbaits, and soft jerkbaits for

targeting fast current areas for summertime Smallmouth Bass from a shallow-draft boat, kayak or canoe.

## Slow and steady with soft swimbaits

Boot tail and grub tail soft swimbaits excel in many river fishing situations but are best in fast current scenarios. I like to fish these swimbaits with a 7-foot, medium power, fast-action baitcasting outfit spooled with 10-pound-test fluorocarbon line.

I prefer fishing soft swimbaits in the fastest water I target. As the boat drifts through 1- to 3-foot riffles, many with standing waves, make perpendicular (to the bank) casts into the flow. I am a big proponent of stop-and-go retrieves in some situations but not here. In this frothing disturbance, I want the bait to be easy to track. The tail of the bait gives it all the action it needs. Any Smallmouth Bass holding near the heavy flow are likely eating minnows. Use an easy-to-eat minnow imitation, and bass will take it.

There are many soft swimbait rigging options. For the best hook-up ratio in river situations, I have the best results with a standard  $\frac{3}{16}$ - or  $\frac{1}{4}$ -ounce mushroom-shaped leadhead jig. Steady retrieves with just enough speed to keep from hanging up work best. Smallmouth Bass will often intercept the bait from behind and continue swimming. If you feel an odd weight, wind in quickly to regain any slack, then set the hook.



*Soft swimbaits are easy to work and are ideal for young Smallmouth Bass anglers.*

## Soft jerkbaits in the pockets

The irregular banks along riffle areas often feature protected pockets where Smallmouth Bass can escape the heavy current to intercept bait. It's a perfect place to hit repeatedly with soft plastic jerkbaits.

Nearly all soft bait manufacturers make some type of soft plastic jerkbait. To most anglers, these softbaits are known generically as "flukes," regardless

of the maker. Ones in the 4- to 5-inch variety excel for river Smallmouth Bass.

As with soft swimbaits, there are many ways of rigging flukes. I prefer to fish flukes without any added weight, by either nose-hooking the fluke with a size 1 octopus-style hook or rigging it Texas-style with either a 3/0 or 4/0 extra wide gap hook. Nose hooking gives the bait a bit more freedom, increasing its movement, which may translate into added bites. The hook-up ratio can be better. With softer varieties of flukes, you will go through a lot of baits as baits rip free while fighting a fish.

For fishing flukes for river Smallmouth Bass, I prefer a 6½- to 7-foot medium power, fast action spinning rod and a 25- to 30-size spinning reel spooled with 15-pound-test braided line. For a leader, use 4- to 6-feet of 10- or 12-pound-test fluorocarbon line, which provides some separation between the braid and the bait.

Hold the boat a short cast distance from the pocket water as it drifts along, firing casts into the pockets. Most hits will occur soon after the bait has hit the water, so don't fish the bait the whole way back to the boat. Maybe just one twitch, pause after the initial splashdown, then wind in and fire a cast to the next pocket. The boat will be moving at a good clip, so it's imperative to get the lure back to a sweet spot.

## Hard suspending jerkbaits

Hard suspending jerkbaits are best in areas where the riffle transitions into a run. Such areas hold feeding Smallmouth Bass, but these fish get a better look at the bait due to the reduced current. Often, bass need to be coerced into striking.

Use an aggressive snap, pause, retrieve to get the attention of Smallmouth Bass. Then, provide the opportunity for the fish to eat it. Pauses of 1- to 3-seconds will cause Smallmouth Bass to jump on the lure.

Fish suspending hard baits on the same spinning set up as flukes. Baits in the 3- to 3½-inch range are appropriate. ☐



*Cherry picking baits (from top to bottom): boot tail soft swimbait, grub tail soft swimbait, soft jerkbait and suspending hard jerkbait.*

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