

# Shenango River Lake *in the Fall*



**by Darl Black** photos by the author

Shenango River Lake, Mercer County, can be challenging to fish at times due to its flood control mandate. Runoff from heavy rains in the region push the water level over the banks in short order.

However, one of the best times for anglers to catch an array of popular fish species at this lake is upon us right now. Severe rain storms are less likely in the autumn, thereby reducing the chance of the lake flooding.

“Shenango River Lake is not an easy lake to fish if you are accustomed to finding bass in or near weedbeds, because Shenango River Lake has zero weeds or grass,” said Randy Hedderick, a local bass angler who manages a Facebook page about fishing Shenango River Lake. “Shenango River Lake Largemouth Bass and Smallmouth Bass relate to various bottom structure throughout the year rather than vegetation. Also, Shenango River Lake is only one of two lakes in northwestern Pennsylvania with a hybrid Striped Bass population, a species that behaves differently from black bass.”

During the summer, Hedderick chases hybrid Striped Bass, because the species is taking bait on the surface. But, when the water temperature drops below 77 degrees F, strippers become sluggish and are less likely to boil the surface.

“However, with the start of the cooldown in September the lake’s black bass begin moving shallow to feed heavily in preparation for the approaching winter,” said Hedderick.

“Largemouth Bass and Smallmouth Bass concentrate in the 4- to 6-foot depths around rock and wood. My friend and I make catches of impressive black bass with a square bill crankbait and a spinnerbait.”

There are days when Largemouth Bass and Smallmouth Bass downshift from an aggressive feeding mode.

“On tough days we slow-roll a spinnerbait,” said Hedderick. “The retrieve is close to the bottom, just fast enough to have the blades revolving slowly. This technique catches big bass and is our answer to dragging soft plastic. If the weather remains warm into November, we continue to catch Largemouth Bass and Smallmouth Bass in the shallows.”

With regard to hybrid Striped Bass in the fall, Hedderick explains there is a brief period in early October when hybrids return to chasing shad near the surface. “This is when a soft jerkbait is the number one lure to use, danced just under the surface.”

Rick Como is another member of the hybrid Striped Bass and White Bass fraternity on Shenango River Lake. He views September as a transition month for hybrid Striped Bass and White Bass, as the two related species travel in the same circles through the summer and fall.

“During September, I catch both species on live bait fished below the layer of suspended shad. I use an egg sinker weight to keep my line vertical, a circle hook, and live Gizzard Shad, which I catch with a cast net. Then, I wind drift or slow troll over the shad schools,” said Como.

But, following the final topwater bite in October, Como moves to the ledges and quick-breaking points that



*Hybrid Striped Bass are the stars of Shenango River Lake. These fish have a 20-inch minimum size. A large hybrid Striped Bass at Shenango River Lake may weigh 14- to 15-pounds, although most are in the 8- to 12-pound range.*

drop into the main river channel to fish blade baits and vibrating crankbaits.

“By mid-October the water temperature is usually in the mid-50s. Balls of shad are everywhere and at various depths,” said Como. “I know from years of experience that trying for suspended stripers at this time is not productive.”

“Instead, I have discovered my best chance of catching hybrids is by moving to ledges. I continue fishing vertically, but now, I am jiggging vibrating baits near the bottom from 10- to 25-feet or more.

Productive baits are blades and lipless sinking crankbaits. I not only catch hybrids but also White Bass, Smallmouth Bass, Yellow Perch, and White Crappies.”

Mention crappies at Shenango River Lake, and the name Ken Smith automatically enters the conversation.

“In September, crappies are spread out in deeper water and suspended in the water column. White Crappies are particularly difficult to find and catch,” said Smith. “On the other hand, Black Crappies are easier to locate, because these fish are more likely relating to deep wood—brush piles, logs, stumps, debris piles, or manmade cribs. I often find Black Crappies suspended 8- to 10-feet down over 16- to 18-feet of water, where there is some sort of structure on the bottom,” said Smith.

Smith uses a slow-trolling tightline technique to present a 2-inch soft plastic baby shad lure. A ½-ounce egg sinker positioned on the line 14 inches from his ¼-ounce jig keeps the soft plastic bait at the proper depth.

When the water temperature cools more in mid-October, crappies move tighter to cover and are easier for the typical angler to locate.

If you have been thinking about a trip to Shenango River Lake, now is a good time to take it. ☐



*Largemouth Bass feed shallow in the early fall on Shenango River Lake.*