Can't Thank You Enough!

The Commissioners and the staff of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission want to thank the many volunteers who sponsor the 189 cooperative nurseries for the outstanding job they do each year in raising fish for the anglers of Pennsylvania. The additional fish provided by these nurseries complement the more than 100 million warmwater and coolwater fish already stocked each year by the Commission.

There are 155 sportsmen's organizations that manage these cooperative nurseries in 49 counties. Sixty-two of these nurseries have been in existence for over 25 years. The oldest participant in the program is the Windber Sportsmen Association, Somerset County, which has been a cooperator since 1932.

The Fish and Boat Commission supplies these nursery units with over one million free fingerling fish. We also provide them with technical guidance on rearing and stocking these fish. The co-ops then raise the fish at their own nursery facilities and at their own expense. The vast majority of the cooperative nurseries specialize in trout production. Last year coldwater units stocked over 900,800 adult trout. Included in this total were 431,000 brook trout, 222,000 brown trout, 330,000 rainbow trout and 3,650 palomino trout. In addition, 90,800 steelhead and 128,000 chinook salmon were released into Commonwealth waters, thanks to the cooperative nursery program. The average length of the stocked salmonids is 11 inches.

Four warmwater nurseries stocked a total of 3,235 largemouth bass into 10 southeast Pennsylvania waterways. These bass ranged in size from six to 14 inches in length.

The coolwater nursery in Erie County released 2,000 walleye fingerlings into Presque Isle Bay.

The striped bass nursery stocked 78,000 striped bass (1+ to nine inches) into Raystown Lake, Huntingdon County.

The volunteers expended almost 162,000 hours of work in the operation and maintenance of their 189 nurseries and stocking programs. Last year the co-op units spent $279,000 of their own money raising fish. They also invested an additional $146,000 making improvements to their facilities.

I also want to thank the Commission's dedicated Cooperative Nursery Unit staff for the important job they do in assisting the co-op nurseries. Last year, they traveled more than 60,000 miles to conduct 388 inspections—120 of these were emergency visits.

Again, on behalf of everyone in the Commission and the anglers of Pennsylvania, we thank the cooperative nursery volunteers for their tremendous efforts in the production of fish.
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This issue’s front cover shows the 125th Anniversary Smallmouth Bass Print, by Pennsylvania artist George Lavanish. The print commemorates the 125th anniversary of the Commission’s bass management. For complete information on obtaining prints, contact Wilderness Editions at 1-800-355-7645.

Sneak Preview of February 1996
The February 1996 Angler is going to be special. In addition to our usual 32 pages, the issue will include a 16-page publication on shad restoration in the Susquehanna River. The publication will focus on the history of shad restoration, descriptions of fish species involved, current restoration efforts, restocking and biomonitoring, current successes and future challenges, connection to other Chesapeake Bay programs, public involvement, and the benefits of shad restoration. A team of employees from the Fish & Boat Commission, the Susquehanna River Basin Commission, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation is currently preparing this comprehensive publication.

Because this publication will be included in the regular February 1996 issue, make sure your subscription is current. This is one keeper you’ll want to hold on to.

Susquehanna River shad restoration will spawn interesting developments for conservation and angling groups. The Delaware River Shad Fishermen's Association (DRSFA) was founded nearly 20 years ago to maintain some 300 miles of clean, free-flowing river for the shad and for the anglers who pursue them. Will Susquehanna River anglers create a Susquehanna River Shad Fishermen’s Association? Although the Susquehanna has no open shad season now, as the Delaware did when DRSFA was formed, perhaps forming a Susquehanna River group would hasten the arrival of that day.

-Art Michaels, Chief, Magazines and Publications.
The secret to better casting on small streams is to look around you before you make any cast.

Small-Stream Tactics

by Charles R. Meck

As the opening day of the Pennsylvania grouse season started, Craig Josephson and I fished a small southwestern Pennsylvania trout stream. Nearby gunshots reminded us that we probably should have hunted that morning than be on a stream holding streambred brown and native brook trout. But by accident we discovered this un-fished gem of a trout stream with plenty of streambred browns and native brook trout earlier that year. It was no accident that we fly fished this small stream this late in the season. Small streams hold trout all months of the year.

For more than I care to remember I have fly fished streams small enough to jump across. I even cut my teeth on these small streams. And I continue to this day to enjoy these small stream gems thoroughly and their unending supply of native trout—even while others hunt.

More than 45 years ago I fished my first small trout stream in Schuylkill County in southeastern Pennsylvania. I hiked four miles into the desolate, small, four-foot wide, crystal-clear stream. To the left, right and overhead thick, green rhododendron bushes prevented almost any type of cast. I had no bamboo, fiberglass or graphite fly rod to cast. I carried only an old metal telescoping rod—a poor excuse for a fly rod. When I entered the stream I saw a half-dozen brook trout scurry downstream away from me. The first hour I spent getting my Royal Coachman out of every nearby branch along the bank. I shortly began to question whether the frustration of attempting to cast was worth the effort. For each minute my pattern spent on the water, I spent five minutes untangling the line or fly from a nearby bush. Many anglers quit in disgust shortly after they attempt fly fishing their first small stream. At that point I doubted that I’d ever try this type of fly fishing again.

It took me more than an hour to catch my first brook trout on a fly on that small eastern Pennsylvania trout stream. That first eight-inch brook trout, and many others since, motivated me to continue a long tradition of small-stream fly fishing right up to the present. The tranquil unspoiled environment of many small, native trout streams makes fishing on them well worth the frustration. You’ll soon find that catching beautifully colored streambred trout produces a real high. On streams where you only infrequently see another angler and no path along the stream, you’ll find that an eight-inch native excites you as much as catching a 15-inch stocked trout. On these small streams to succeed you have to prepare for a totally different way of fly fishing.

When I bought the proper fishing gear for these small streams I began enjoying fly fishing on them. A six-foot to eight-foot rod with a balanced reel helped me cast much more effectively. Once I learned to look overhead, to the right, to the left, behind and in front of me before I cast on those bush-lined small streams, I began to catch more trout.

When I began to learn a few unique casts designed for special small-stream situations, I also caught more trout. And when I began accepting the fact that small streams hold plenty of native...
and streambred trout that act differently than planted trout, I caught more fish.

The better you're prepared to cope with these three small-stream problems, the better you'll succeed. These three obstacles, plus a good supply of appropriate fly patterns, can make you a much better small-fly fisher. Let's look at each.

**Rods**

That telescoping rod I owned certainly didn't help me enjoy fishing small streams. Nowadays anglers can purchase a good graphite fly rod specifically designed for small-stream fly fishing. I prefer one seven to 7 1/2 feet long designed for a 4 or 5 fly line with an appropriate matching and balanced reel. On most streams I use a leader six to seven feet long with a 4X or 5X tippet. Make the tippet no longer than 15 to 20 inches. Longer leaders only get you in trouble. Don't go finer than 5X on the tippet—most of the time a 4X tippet works, and the extra strength helps you dislodge flies from leaves and branches more quickly.

Ralph Dougherty of McKeesport once said that he feels like he's fishing in a tunnel when he fishes on a small stream. First and foremost, when you're casting here you'll find that every branch, bush, leaf and blade of grass along the stream reaches out to grab your fly. Even after these decades of fly fishing I often spend more time getting flies untangled than casting over trout. The secret to better casting on small streams is to look around you before you make any cast. Remember that on these small streams you have precious little room to cast. Take a few seconds before you cast to each new riffle or pool. Check your backcast to see if you have room. Look overhead and see if you have room to cast there. After you see what kind of room you have to cast, then decide what type of cast you'll use.

**Casting**

Anglers often get into trouble on small streams because they think and act like they're fly fishing on larger streams. Often that overhand cast that you're comfortable with just won't work here—there isn't enough room to cast that way. Often a side-arm cast that brings the fly just above the water's surface works just fine. If you don't have any room to backcast, then try a roll cast. Lift your rod up and roll the line out. In really close quarters I use a bow-and-arrow cast. By holding the fly and leader in one hand and the fly rod in the other, you can aim the fly exactly where you want it to float. The bow-and-arrow only works on short casts less than 15 feet long. But when there's scarce little room to cast, try the bow-and-arrow cast.

If all other types of casts fail, you try a flipping cast. Hold the fly in your left hand (if you're right-handed) and the rod in your right hand and just flip the fly to a predetermined spot. This also works best on short casts, and it's so simple that few anglers ever think of using it.

In small-stream casting, anything goes. Even the most unorthodox cast, if it reaches the location you want, is acceptable. If you're right-handed you might want to try some casts with your left hand and vice versa. After you've placed that fly just where you want it, get ready for some action. Often these native trout hit almost immediately after the fly has landed, so it's important to get ready for any action as soon as the fly hits the water.

When fly fishing on a small stream, remember that many of the trout you're fishing over are streambred trout. First and foremost...
**Small-Stream Tactics**

you must approach each productive-looking pool, riffle and pocket water very carefully and furtively. Your approach to the stream can mean the difference between a good day and a poor one. More often than not, once you’ve learned to cope with these wily natives, you’ll find yourself bending, kneeling, stooping and hiding behind every boulder, log and tree you can find. Often you’ll cast from a bent or prone position, hoping not to disturb any of the trout in a pool. Very often you’ll see your cast drooped over a log on the stream, and if you do catch a trout you’ll have to lift the fish up over the log.

Even when your approach is perfect, you’ll see trout scurrying upstream and downstream. Wild trout behave differently than planted fish and often stay within a few feet of good cover. So you have a good fly rod, you’ve practiced some of the usual casts you’ll need for these small streams, and you realize that native and streambred trout react differently than planted trout. What else should you know about fly fishing on those small streams? It’s essential that you carry a good supply of fly patterns that seem to produce in a variety of situations.

**Flies**

Under most conditions you’ll discover that trout in small streams are not very selective. If you prefer using dry flies, try using attractors and terrestrials. Both the Wulff Royal Coachman and the Patriot work well in low light, heavy canopy conditions because both have white wings. You can easily follow these wings in most instances.

I developed the Patriot more than 10 years ago and have used it consistently on small streams for the past decade. It far outfishes any other dry fly pattern I’ve ever used. With its white calf tail wings, brown hackle and tail, and smoky-blue Krystal Flash body with a midrib of red floss, the Patriot brings plenty of trout to the surface. Craig Josephson has often seen native trout hit the Patriot four and five times before he caught them. Don’t be without this deadly small-stream pattern.

Remember to carry a good supply of terrestrials when you fly fish small streams. Beetles, crickets and ants work well, but they’re difficult to follow because most patterns are black. Use patterns that have a red, orange or white spot on top to help you follow the pattern in low light. And don’t worry if that ant sinks on you—trout often take sunken terrestrials.

If you prefer using wet flies, then you have a great selection. My top choice under all conditions is a size 16 Bead Head Pheasant Tail Nymph. This pattern works under all conditions in all seasons of the year. Use the wet fly with a dry fly as a strike indicator placed just six inches to a foot above the wet fly, depending on the depth and type of water you’re fishing. This way you’ll catch trout whether they’re looking to the surface or underneath for food.

I’ll never forget that first time Craig Josephson used the short tandem of the Patriot and Bead Head on a small stream. He tied a size 16 Bead Head Pheasant Tail Nymph six inches behind the Patriot dry fly to see if the setup would work. While Craig used two patterns I used only the Patriot dry fly. Craig fished behind me on a small stream one early October. In water that I had just fished, Craig continually picked up trout behind me on the Bead Head. At the end of the day we tallied up our catch. Craig had out-fished me three to one with that tandem setup. So if you want to increase your catch greatly on these small streams, you definitely have to try the tandem setup with the Patriot and the Bead Head.

If you use the tandem setup on small streams, make certain you don’t use a tippet finer than 4X. If you do you’ll find yourself trying constantly to untangle the two patterns all day long.

If you plan to fly fish in early spring or under heavy runoff conditions, you might want to take a couple of patterns like a Woolly Bugger, Lady Ghost and Green Weenie for those small streams. You’ll find that the Green Weenie works well almost any time on these small streams. Tie some in sizes 10 and 12 on long shank hooks. Add some weight to the body to make them sink faster. Green Weenies also work well tied behind the Patriot.

**Hatches**

Don’t overlook hatches on some of these small streams. Some of the greatest and most productive green drake hatches I’ve ever witnessed occurred on small streams. Here, green drakes often emerge all day long and trout continuously feed during the hatch. You’ll often note that the drakes are a size or two smaller than those on Penns Creek and other larger streams. So carry some patterns tied on size 12 or 14 long-shank hooks.

George Harvey often talks about the 17-inch streambred brown trout he once caught on a small stream during a green drake hatch. That huge trout left the protection of an undercut bank to feed on naturals floating nearby. If you hit a green drake hatch on one of these streams, you’ll note immediately that trout lose their timidity during the hatch. Often you’ll find yourself fishing over trout rising to green drakes for several hours. On one Blair County small stream that holds a green drake hatch, I saw trout rising to drakes for more than four hours one afternoon. Some of these trout measured over 12 inches long.

Unlike larger streams you’ll also find that few trout on these smaller streams refuse your pattern during a hatch. On Penns Creek I’ve often quit in disgust because either trout refused my pattern or there were too many naturals floating on the surface. You won’t find either problem on small streams. Trout readily take any pattern closely resembling the natural, and you’ll find only a few naturals emerging at any one time.

You’ll find other hatches on some of these small gems. The dark green drake often appears at the same time as the green drake. I’ve often seen both of these huge mayflies appearing in the same pool on a small stream. You’ll also find blue quills, sulphurs and hendricksons emerging on these branches and tributaries.

After a lifetime of enjoyment on small streams, I didn’t mind hearing those October shots at grouse and squirrels. I know that small streams also offer a fantastic outdoor experience. Any beautifully colored native trout that you catch in this pristine environment is an added bonus. You too can enjoy small-stream fly fishing if you prepare yourself for the trip. Remember that fly fishing on these miniature streams presents many problems. Look around before you cast, and be prepared to use many different and some unorthodox casts. Be ready by taking the proper equipment, which includes a seven-foot fly rod and a balanced reel. And don’t forget that leader—it shouldn’t be any longer than seven feet. Once you have the proper equipment, the proper frame of mind and a good selection of patterns, you are ready to explore new territory and enjoy fly fishing on that small stream where few others visit. Once you attain a certain skill level, you too can enjoy the great outdoors and fly fishing on those great small streams of Pennsylvania.
Sweeping my rod tip to 12 o’clock, the graphite shaft bowed under the weight of a suspected largemouth.

“That’s three hits on your last three casts!” said an astonished Lee Duer, who had been tossing a six-inch plastic worm to the same structure. Convinced my lure was working magic, he said, “I didn’t bring any blade baits. Got an extra one?” The question was meekly posed, since Lee had snickered when I tied on the blade bait back at the ramp.

“I suppose you might find another one in my box,” I said, knowing well I had a tray filled with blades of different colors and sizes. “But first, get the net under this monster.” The largemouth turned out to be a solid four-pounder. The previous two had weighed around three pounds each.

This time the blade had clearly outfished plastic worms and deep-diving crankbaits, both of which I had cast over the spot before throwing the blade. I was learning that a blade bait often triggers strikes from largemouths when traditional lures fail.

Later that afternoon when Lee boated his second largemouth on a borrowed blade, he said, “Guess I’ll be adding some blades to my summertime bass box.”

Overview

Exactly what is a blade bait? Imagine a weighted willow-leaf spinner blade with hooks—that gives you a rough idea. Many anglers refer to it as a hybrid lure with the bottom-knocking potential of a jig, the vibration of a crankbait, and the flash of a spinnerbait. To me a blade bait is a blade bait—it is unlike anything else in the tackle box.

Blade baits incorporate a lead head molded to a thin, flat teardrop-shaped metal blade rigged with one or two treble hooks. The Silver Buddy is a typical traditional blade bait. Some manufacturers have designed blades with a cupped or concave body, such as Luhr-Jensen’s Ripple Tail and Reef Runner’s Cicada. Bullet Lures makes a blade bait, the Bullet, from zinc instead of steel and lead.

The line is attached to a snap placed through a hole on the bait’s back. Line should never be tied direct to the lure. The metal edge will cut the monofilament when pressure is applied. Besides, a light-wire round-bend snap increases the lure’s action.

In most instances, fishing a blade involves two distinct processes—an attracting step and a triggering step. When pulled through water, the blade vibrates wildly, attracting fish with both sound and flash.
Blades are available in a range of weights from micro sizes to ones weighing two ounces. The appropriate sizes for Pennsylvania largemouths range from 3/8-ounce to 3/4-ounce, with a 1/2-ounce model getting the nod most of the time.

through water, the blade vibrates wildly, attracting fish with both sound and flash. However, when given slack line, the bait falls toward the bottom in a tight spiral. The drop becomes the injured baitfish aspect, which convinces fish to strike.

Regardless of species, the majority of hits occur as the bait is falling. Therefore, instead of steadily cranking the lure, an angler should include the combination of both forward (or upward) vibration and a slack line drop in the presentation. Of course, as with any guideline, there are bound to be exceptions.

Blades catch any fish that swims, from the largest gamefish to the least favorite rough fish. Pennsylvania anglers familiar

with the blade consider it to be most effective during the cool water of spring and fall when directed at deepwater walleyes and smallmouths. But as I have learned over the years, it has much wider application.

Switch to warmwater largemouths

I have been using blade baits for over 15 years. However, I never considered the blade bait as a serious lure for summer largemouths until about four years ago. The transition was by accident.

One summer day when I could not scrounge a single bass from an often-fished reservoir with my usual lineup of largemouth baits, I tried a blade. A stiff breeze hampered exact positioning with the electric motor, so in desperation I jigged a blade on points while letting the boat drift with the breeze. In three passes I managed a pair of largemouths about two pounds each—far from spectacular, but the results created enough interest to continue experimenting.

At first I tried a blade only if a breeze made worm fishing difficult or the structure was too deep for a crankbait. Eventually, as confidence grew with each largemouth caught, the blade saw more and more water time. Today, when preparing to fish a reservoir for largemouths, the blade gets first-class seating right beside the plastic worm, grub, jig-and-pig and crankbait for presentations to deepwater largemouths.

Why add a blade to your summer arsenal? Because it provides depth and speed control that few other lures can match. A blade goes deeper than any crankbait on the market. By actually rubbing bottom, you learn the contour and location of bass-holding objects. The blade fishes faster than a worm or grub while providing a level of flash and sound that soft-plastic lures cannot achieve.

Retrieving a Cast

Start at about 9:00 and sweep the rod tip to about 11:00. Lower the rod tip slowly while reeling in slack line. Repeat sweep.

Vertical Jigging

Start at about 7:00 and sweep the rod tip to about 10:00. Lower the rod tip slowly and repeat. Do not reel in any line.

Tackle

Blades are available in a range of weights from micro sizes to ones weighing two ounces. The appropriate sizes for Pennsylvania largemouths range from 3/8-ounce to 3/4-ounce, with a 1/2-ounce model getting the nod most of the time. They may be fished on either spinning or casting outfits—the choice is yours. The important considerations are rod action and line weight.
I prefer a six- to seven-foot medium-power graphite blank with a powerful butt and a fast tip. A rod that's too soft will not manipulate the bait correctly nor achieve a solid hookset. On the other hand, a rod that's too stiff will not transmit the vibration of the bait properly and may literally rip the bait out of the mouth of the bass.

My favorite blade bait rod is a six-foot spinning rod I built some years ago for worm fishing. However, one drawback to using a spinning outfit is being restricted to no more than 12-pound-test monofilament. Jumping to 14-pound-test line on a standard-size spinning reel usually results in line not laying properly on the spool. If targeting relatively snag-free humps and roadbeds, it is possible to get by with 12-pound-test. However, when confronted with structure with lots of stumps, switch to a casting outfit with an abrasion-resistant 14- to 17-pound-test monofilament to recover more snagged baits.

What about using blade baits on the new braided lines? Having experimented with braided lines for two years, I can positively say "Not for me at this time." The problems with braided line include too much buoyancy, especially when jigging in deep water, inability to slingshot hung lures free from snags, and lack of shock strength.

Presentation

In general terms, the same blade bait techniques that take other species take largemouths. When fishing smallmouths and walleyes, I jig vertically about 80 percent of the time because I am targeting depths to 35 feet. But largemouths are rarely that deep. Two to 18 feet is the usual depth range for summertime largemouths. Keeping in mind there are other lures that are better suited for the shallowest water, I consider a blade for depths greater than seven feet. When probing water between seven and 15 feet, I generally cast the blade.

The basic casting technique involves swimming the lure with a lift-and-drop retrieve that moves the bait in small hops. Following the cast, hold the rod tip at 10 o'clock and watch for a possible strike as the blade sinks to the bottom. Then, dropping the rod tip to almost 9 o'clock, carefully reel in slack. Next, sweep the rod tip to about 11 o'clock and hold it there until the blade falls to the bottom again. The clock positions are only approximate guidelines.

The rod tip should not be simply lifted as you might do in worm fishing. Nor should it be snapped too hard, otherwise the bait's rear treble hook will tangle the line. A firm sweep definitely describes the rod movement.

The rod must move far enough and fast enough to generate lure vibration. Flat-sided blades require more energy (translated as greater force and higher hops) to activate the lure. On the other hand, cupped blade baits must be finessed (translated as gentler, smaller hops). Too hard a sweep causes a cupped blade to roll over instead of vibrate.

Vertical jigging is effective in certain largemouth situations. This permits pinpoint fishing of edges such as creek channel lips, or targeting individual pieces of isolated cover visible on the depthfinder. Vertical jigging means fishing the blade straight down like a yo-yo. The bait is free-spoled to the bottom, the reel engaged and slack line taken up as the rod tip is lowered.
The angle of a retrieved crankbait (diving lip down) protects a tangle of root tentacles. I sweep the rod tip upward once more. Falls after each rod sweep. Then, before the blade collides with specter of a blade. Hits take place as the bait falls, or when it is faster than the line is sinking, watching for line movement that would indicate a strike. Lure jumps of about 12 inches are most fruitful in producing strikes from summer largemouths.

A blade bait does have limitations. With exposed treble hooks, a blade can be easily fouled in vegetation or snagged on solid obstacles. It is more prone to hanging on objects than a crankbait. The angle of a retrieved crankbait (diving lip down) protects its treble hooks. If nudged into a stump, give a crankbait some slack to float free. However, a blade has no lip protection and it sinks when you stop moving it. Simply put, a blade bait is not designed to be fished in heavy cover.

However, with some practice it is possible to fish it around and over some of those sticky situations. Here is an example. Fishing a blade through sporadic stumps on a sloping point can be deadly. Once I have established the bottom on the initial drop, I use high hops and anticipate the bottom as the bait free-falls after each rod sweep. Then, before the blade collides with a tangle of root tentacles, I sweep the rod tip upward once more. Sure, you hang wood now and then, but that is part of fishing.

I am partial to casting a blade on points, mid-lake humps and submerged roadbeds. I vertical jig it around bridge pillars and old submerged abutments. It can be deadly along the edge of a creek channel, but you must have the skill to maneuver around overhanging stumps. Also, try near-vertical jigging as the boat drifts across deep flats.

Of course, there are areas to avoid. Dense stump fields and brushpiles gobble blades, especially if broken strands of monofilament are tangled in the cover.

Vegetation fouls blades. But if the deep weed edge is a solid wall instead of sporadic clumps, it’s possible to work a blade along the edge. Gravel or rock rubble does not pose a problem for a blade, but be sure to stay away from manmade riprap because the craggy rock edges and cavities consume baits.

**Hookset**

Rarely does a strike occur on the forward or upward movement of a blade. Hits take place as the bait falls, or when it is sitting on the bottom. Sometimes the strike will be felt in the rod, but often you don’t detect a fish until you attempt to sweep the bait upward and encounter resistance. However, carefully observing the sinking slack line on the surface telegraphs a strike. It may be an obvious sideways movement, or only a slight tick.

Always set the hook immediately with a full upward rod sweep to about 12 o’clock. Keep the line taut, but don’t attempt to “rush” the fish. If the hooks are not as sharp as possible, many fish will be missed.

My hooks are filed to a diamond cutting point with the barb squeezed flat. Flattening the barb increases the likelihood of penetration to the hook bend. Many fish are lost because the barb hinder penetration past the point. Then, if slack occurs in the line, the blade drops from the fish’s mouth.

The blade bait is not the easiest lure to learn for largemouths, but once mastered it will become one of your favorite summer baits.

**Reducing line twist**

Blade baits are notorious for twisting line because the lure spirals as it falls. Using a ball-bearing swivel cuts down on the twist. The most effective use of a swivel is 12 to 18 inches above the bait. To save time on the water, monofilament leaders with round-bend snap on one end and a ball-bearing swivel on the other end may be tied ahead of time.

When the line becomes too twisted to fish effectively, snip the lure and all terminal tackle from the line. Moving the boat at trolling speed, play the line out until 40 or 50 yards trails behind the boat. Continue trolling for five minutes. Then slowly reel in the line while maintaining pressure by running the line between your thumb and forefinger.—DB.

**Reducing blade loss**

When fishing in largemouth habitat, anglers are bound to snag some blade baits. One way to reduce hang-ups is to snap the leading line on the front treble hook with wire cutters. The resulting double hook is less prone to snag stumps and brush.

Knowing how to free a snagged lure quickly is invaluable, not only saving a costly artificial but saving time, too. The following technique works on most artificial lures.

As soon as you realize a blade is hung on something other than a fish, immediately cease pulling on the bait. Holding the rod with one hand, point the tip skyward. Grasp the line with thumb and forefinger of the other hand between the reel and the first guide. Stretch the line just like pulling a bow string. When the line is completely taut and the rod is deeply bowed, release the line. At the same instance, whip the rod toward the snagged lure. Repeat two or three times if needed.

This slingshot approach can free most lures that are wedged in something, and it frequently dislodges hooks from wood. However, it is rarely effective if hung on someone’s old line.—DB.

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**Options for Working a Blade Bait**
Your cast is perfect. The lime-color jig plops inches beyond a toppled, underwater oak. The lure sinks slowly, brushing a mossy limb, and continues downward. As you intently watch the line, it twitches, and you set the hook into something hefty.

The fish dashes and tangles in the oak limbs, but you use steady pressure and bring the fish toward you--its silvery head nodding with each turn of the reel. You grab the mouth of a crappie. A big, well-fed, old' granddad crappie, the size that earns den-wall space, wins the area fishing contest and puts a smile on even the most veteran crappie fisherman.

Big-crappie areas

"Big slabs" aren't your ordinary panfish. They never come as easy as youngster "specks." Whether you fish a lake or river where one-pounders reign as kings or you haunt a water that grows two- or three-pounders, large crappies can be caught. The first step to catching them is to discover your water's slab-crappie area.

In spring and early summer, big crappies are often in a shallow, vulnerable position. In June, you might encounter fish spawning at weeds, sunken wood and rocks in backwater coves and bays, on flats, and sometimes along the main lake or river bank.

At other waters, such as the shallower, dingier impoundments in southeastern Pennsylvania, the big crappies have already spawned. However, these overlooked post-spawn fish may be holding not far from their nesting sites, suspended by nearby structure.

On a waterway of any type, you can find crappies in dozens of places. Certain areas, however, attract much larger fish than do other sections of the same water. One biologist who researched reservoir crappies for several years found that one cove would usually provide small one- and two-year-old crappies while another lake arm held lots of bigger four- to six-year-old fish. The difference between the two arms was angling pressure.

The small-crappie cove held lots of algae blooms, mainly because it's a more fertile watershed. The water's not as clear, so the crappies spawn in more shallow water and this makes them much easier to catch. The fish were small because they were caught before they had a chance to grow very large.

At the other lake arm, though, the water's clear and the fish spawn deep. It's not very fertile, so the total number of fish isn't high. That makes them pretty tough to catch, so the area does not get as much pressure. Anglers don't take nearly as many crappies there, and the fish have a chance to live longer and grow larger. The people who know how to catch them, though, are very successful.

Extra-clear water sections may rate as top spots on impoundments and natural lakes that have them, but on other waters, the unharvested crappie factor comes in another guise. At a shallower, murkier impoundment, one angling expert said that although a large bridge is the most popular spot with crappie anglers, the largest fish come from certain coves.

These coves might be out-of-the-way areas that require a long boat ride where you'd search for crappie cover such as flooded brush or vegetation. Or the cove could be nearby but underfished because all of the cover is underwater--hidden until you find it by trolling or using a depth finder.

Big-crappie expert John J. Phillips, Jr., has spent many hours at the Delaware River. He told me that on rivers, he, too, looks for hidden cover and hard-to-fish areas.

Phillips once caught the Pennsylvania state record (three pounds, six ounces) and he currently holds the world record for white crappie on four-pound-test line (three pounds even.) His daughter
Patricia also captured a two-pound, 11-ounce crappie, the current two-pound-line world record. Phillips explained that one river cove, which attracts big crappies because of easy access to deep water, does get pressure. The big-crappie cover, however, is all hidden well below the surface.

The right cover
Perhaps you’ve found an area with a few, if any, fishermen, but you think that many of its crappies go unharvested. This is an ideal area in which to find the cover that crappies love. Slabs are picky, though. Hefty crappies may shy away from dense branches and thick weeds.

“I’ve fished with a fellow,” said one biologist, “who works brush piles. He felt that he’d catch small crappies around a recently dropped tree that still had a lot of small branches attached because the big crappies couldn’t or wouldn’t be attracted to this structure. It makes sense. A fish with a large body is not able to move through branches easily, so it may want to avoid them.”

For springtime fishing, it’s best to locate several structures at moderate to shallow depths so you’re always able to fish a productive depth for the crappies, which move with the weather. For fishing later in the summer, the best structure lies deeper, at dropoffs and underwater islands near the water’s thermocline. “Shallow” may mean only a few feet deep in murky water or 10 feet or more at one of our deeper impoundments. “Deep water” may mean 10 feet in murky water but 40-feet-plus in clear.

Baits and lures
Generally, large fish eat large foods. The main factor to determine what fish eat is what’s present and available. Fish are opportunists. For example, a two-pound crappie can eat a large shad, but it may not opt to do so if the small forage fish are the most abundant.

In springtime, crappies often eat small insects, and later, tiny newly hatched fish, and through summer, larger forage fish. Minnows or other baits of the same size or type are top offerings, but similar size jigs and sometimes tiny crankbaits may do as well or better. Crappie-getting colors include chartreuse, white, black, pink, silver and gray for clear water, and chartreuse, white and two-tones for murky water.

Using a depth finder or doing some experimental fishing shows you whether the crappies are hugging cover or are suspending near it. The position of the crappies determines the best fishing method, such as vertically jigging or pitching a jig to crappies in cover, or jigging, slow trolling or casting to fish in open water. Your choice of method, in turn, gives you more clues to the exact lure that will charm the big ones.

Slow, vertical jigging may work when crappies swim in shallow, murky water or in deeper water of any clarity. A 1/32-ounce jig tied to thin monofilament such as four-pound test may do, but in the real deep water, a heavier jig, such as 1/8-ounce, creates more line tension and you can more easily sense hits.

Casting is appropriate when fishing in the shallows of clear water or when shore fishing. Try a long rod, thin line, and a 1/16-ounce jig made of bulky material to slow its descent or it’d ever landed. He worked the fish within netting distance, but the fish, which he estimated at close to 4 1/2 pounds, broke loose.

Phillips’ tactics may catch fish anytime the fish swim reasonably shallow. After keeping a logbook, however, he’s learned that overcast, windy days rate among the best.

There may also be an optimum time of day to pursue big slabs, and it depends on the crappie species. Anglers often find clear-impoundment black crappies are especially active and feeding before sundown and sometime at night. White crappies, generally the dominant species in murkier water, are different—a study at Conowingo Reservoir in southeastern Pennsylvania indicated most of the white’s feeding occurred in morning and early afternoon.

However, whenever and wherever you fish, one thing is certain. It’s always a pleasure to pursue and capture a big of granddad crappie.
The Early Black Stonefly Nymph

by Chauncy K. Lively
photos by the author

Along many trout streams little black stoneflies are among the earliest harbingers of spring. Seeing them scurrying over the snow along the water’s edge is always a cheering sight. They appear at a time when winter doldrums have reached their peak and the water seems to flow black between white banks of snow. But that’s just a temporary state of mind. Funny how clear and sparkly the water appears when the banks are green.

Actually, “early black stonefly” is a generic designation of several small to mid-dling stoneflies that may appear as early as February. They include species of Capnia, Allocapnia and Taeniopteryx, of which the latter were called “snowbank stoneflies” by Dr. Paul Needham, the eminent fisheries biologist. The winged adults are generally black or blackish-brown in color and range in size from less than a quarter-inch to about a half-inch in length. Similarly, with a few exceptions, the nymphs share a dark brownish-black appearance.

These little stoneflies emerge from late winter until early spring and often emerge when many early season anglers are on the streams. Of the books I have seen on the subject of Plecoptera, few discuss the emergence of stoneflies in detail, if at all. Generally, brief mention is made of the nymphs crawling out into the air on exposed boulders, logs or other protrusions from the surface to emerge into winged adults. That was my total conception of stonefly emergence for many years, as it was with other anglers of my acquaintance.

Then I had occasion to fish a gravel-bottom stream with no exposed boulders and I began to see little black stoneflies appear on the surface at midstream. At first I assumed they had flown there from the streamside foliage—perhaps to deposit their eggs. But as I watched more intently now—I could see one after another of the little insects literally pop into view on the surface, struggle briefly to detach themselves from their shucks and fly away. It was definitely an emergence, unlikely as it may have seemed. Then I recalled an event on Penn’s Creek some 15 years earlier.

Following a torrential downpour Penn’s was out of its banks and the color of heavily creamed coffee. Pools of normally modest flow were now raging torrents and the boulders that punctuate the streambed were completely flooded over. But out in midstream, Isonychia duns—the big gray mayflies—were emerging from the surface. From everything I’d read—and from my own experience—Isonychia were supposed to emerge by crawling out of the water on boulders or logs, in the manner of stoneflies. However, now there were no exposed logs or boulders available and the mayflies had to resort to alternative means of emergence which nature provided.

Plainly, the little black stoneflies had been endowed with similar optional means of emergence. Nature accommodates all its creatures—big and small—with the gift of adaptability, without which survival would not be possible.

I reported what I had seen to a couple of close angling friends, and surprisingly they indicated they had observed similar happenings but had dismissed their significance, thinking they had possibly misidentified the little stoneflies. To me, seeing stoneflies behave like hatching mayflies was a revelation, and it changed my whole approach to fishing stonefly nymphs. Previously I had fished them only dead drift and deep, assuming that the only opportunity trout had to capture them was during the drift or as they climbed boulders and logs to emerge. Obviously, the latter offers few fly fishing opportunities. But when they ascend to the surface from their bottom cover, they expose themselves in a significant way and the trout are quick to seize the opportunity. The “Leisenring lift”—raising the rod tip occasionally during the drift to bring the nymph upward—imitates this activity. Actually, the ascent may also be accomplished on a dead drift-cast by allowing the nymph to swing downstream on a taut line at the end of the drift. When all the slack in the line and leader has been expended, the nymph rises to or near the surface.

Unlike some of their cousins—such as Perla and Acroneuria—the early black stonefly nymphs are not broadly flat. Their abdomens are more nearly ovoid in cross section—that is, slightly more flat than round. To achieve this profile in the pattern we provide a flattish underbody by cementing a strip of .019-inch monofilament to each side of the shank. The underbody should not be tapered in the rear as with mayfly nymph patterns. The natural taper of the wound hackle rib provides the slight taper required in the abdomen.

Generally, I like to fish the Early Stonefly Nymph unweighted. However, I carry a few moderately weighted specimens for use in especially fast water. These are weighted by whipping a short piece of flat wrap-around lead, the length of the thorax, underneath the underbody in the thorax area before dubbing is applied. Such placement of the weight permits the nymph to swim naturally, without flipping over on its back.

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The Early Black Stonefly Nymph

1. Cut two strips of .019-inch monofil about 1/8-inch shorter than the hook shank and cement one to each side of the shank, forming a flat underbody. Tie in the thread at mid-shank and wind closely to the rear of the underbody. Strip barbules from two small brown hackles and tie in the ribs as tails. Wind over the tail butts to the mid-shank.

2. Strip the barbules from a large black or brown hackle and soak the rib in water. Tie in the rib, tip forward, at the mid-shank and wind the thread over the rib to the base of the tails. Trim the excess rib and wind the thread forward to the mid-shank.

3. Coat the underbody with Flexament and wind the hackle rib in close turns to form the abdomen. Cut three short lengths of flat nylon thread for the legs and tie them in as shown. Wind the thread back to the mid-shank, wax the thread and apply a little dubbing. Make one turn behind the rear legs.

4. Cut a strip of wing case material slightly wider than the body and cut a notch in one end. With the notched end facing the rear and slightly overhanging the abdomen, tie it in with two turns in front of the rear legs. Fold the wing case back and wind two turns over the edge of the fold. Apply cement to the winds.

5. Apply more dubbing and wind to the middle legs. Pull the wing case forward and tie it down in front of the middle legs. Repeat the foldback as in step 4, and cement the winds.

6. Apply more dubbing and wind to one turn in front of the underbody. Pull the wing case forward and tie off behind the eye. Trim the excess. Finally, whip finish the head and apply head lacquer.

Dressing:
Early Black Stonefly Nymph

Hook: Size 14 or 16 Tietco 5262 (2XL) or equivalent.

Thread: 6/0 black prewaxed.

Tails: Two stripped brown hackle ribs.

Abdomen: One large black or dark-brown stripped hackle rib.

Legs: Tan flat nylon thread, coated lightly with Flexament.

Thorax dubbing: Dark-brown fur or synthetic.

Wing case: Strip of polystyrene sheet plastic, sanded lightly and tinted dark brown with marking pen.

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A Philadelphia Story

My father was not a fisherman. At least he wasn't until the last few years of his life. He was born and raised in the Frankford section of Philadelphia where, he used to tell me, he played half-ball and buck-buck for fun. The greenspace he and his friends knew was cemeteries and occasional trips to Pennypack Park. Marriage, a new job, and several moves later brought him and his young family to the suburbs, Abington, Montgomery County. He was living the American Dream of the 1950s and '60s: A family with four kids and a house in the suburbs, a lawn to mow, gardens to weed, shutters to paint, and fresh air to breathe. He loved it!

I was the one who brought fishing into the house, the oldest of the four children. I don't recall when I first wanted to go fishing. I was probably nine or 10. I do know that I was insistent in my asking. It was obvious, even to me, that my father had no interest in the subject, but constant pleading led to a toy fishing pole for a birthday.

He had no idea where to take me fishing, but an uncle who did know took us and his daughters to the old fish hatchery ponds at Linden Avenue in northeast Philadelphia. They were and still are for children only. Somehow I managed to catch a couple of sunnies and a bullhead. I was ecstatic! He was duly proud but still not interested for himself. That same trip I recall walking down to the Delaware River and seeing dead fish all over the place. Fishkills and pollution were of no interest to 10-year-olds of the time. All that stuck in my mind was their size and the smell!

I started reading the sports magazines about exotic fishing trips to the great rivers and lakes of this country and the world, and I dreamed the dreams of boys with fishing poles and bicycles. For my 12th birthday the uncle who fished finally came through with that dream fishing hole - Lock 12 on the canal at Lumberville. It was a young fisherman's perfect place. There was the canal and the Delaware River to fish, with easy access to both, and a footbridge to walk to New Jersey when the fishing slowed.

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My father finally figured he had better find out about this fishing sport or he was never going to see much of his son. He bought his spinning outfit at Kelly's Korner, a discount store back in the Frankford neighborhood. Through his buddies at work, he found out that he had to buy a license and learned about some basic tackle.

A couple of times out to the stream and he was "hooked," as they say. He would get home from work around 4:30, and if I had managed to dig up some worms, it was off to the Pennypack for a couple of hours after dinner. He loved catching bullheads just as it got dark. We always tried to guess if the pull on the rod was a catfish or a slimy old eel. Easter Sunday 1969 I caught my first trout - a 16-inch rainbow. As my father and I walked back to the car with the fish on the stringer and all the other anglers watching, I don't know who was prouder! Norman Rockwell couldn't have painted the scene any better.

Our picture-perfect home life was shattered when Dad had his first heart attack. Two-and-a-half packs a day, overweight, and bad eating habits seemed normal back then. Rehabilitation was also slower. To us kids it meant, after the hospital stay, that Dad would be home all day! We really never comprehended the seriousness of the situation.

While he was in the hospital he shared a room with a man who lived on the Delaware Canal in Bucks County, who made some suggestions for places to fish. As soon as the doctors let Dad drive again, it was time to explore. We discovered what was to be our dream fishing hole - Lock 12 on the canal at Lumberville. It was a young fisherman's perfect place. There was the canal and the Delaware River to fish, with easy access to both, and a footbridge to walk to New Jersey when the fishing slowed.

If you cast a minnow into the fast water at the lock race, there was a good chance of catching a smallmouth or large panfish. If you cast a crayfish there, it was a certainty. We would see other fishermen go down to the river and bring back a few. When they would ask about our luck, we would pull up the stringer and watch their jaws drop.

On opening day of bass season 1970 my father caught his limit IN THE CANAL! When the bass weren't biting, he would put out doughbait for monster carp and catfish. He enjoyed it so much, this non-fisherman, that we would come home from school and ask where Dad was. “Went fishing at the canal,” Mom would answer. For a man who started fishing only a year or so before, I couldn't believe it. I was happy but at the same time bothered by the fact that he could go fishing while I had to go to school. He understood, though, and more than made up for it on weekends.

In 1971 a third heart attack took his life. He was 43. He left a wife and four children, the oldest, at 15 was I, the youngest, 1 1/2. Years later I grew to understand why he went off fishing by himself so much. To some, fishing is a profession, to some, a hobby. To my father fishing meant a time he could be at peace with himself and his little bit of nature. A pleasant time to think about his family and life itself.

I have a family of my own now. My nine-year-old son fishes with me often and my five-year-old daughter is just getting started. The canal is being repaired, but we sometimes cross the footbridge to New Jersey and I tell them about the grandfather they never knew. Often I am saddened thinking about him not being around. He would have loved his grandchildren. But I take comfort in knowing he was at peace with himself. Fishing helped him find that peace, and for that I am forever thankful.
As my canoe glided around the Susquehanna River bend at Towanda, I could see a young couple ahead in the middle of the river. They were obviously having a good time splashing each other, which was the perfect thing to be doing in the 94-degree heat. But they were also doing something else. They were using a minnow seine.

"Whatcha’ catchin’?" I called when I got close enough to hear a reply over the bubbling riffle noise.

I guess they had not seen me coming because he looked up at me with that deer-in-the-headlights face. He hesitated briefly, then he smiled and answered, "Clippers."

I figured he referred to crayfish. And when he said, "best smallmouth bait you can get," it seemed I was right.

"Yeah," I said. "It’s hard to beat crayfish for smallmouths."

"No!" he quickly retorted. "Hellgrammites!"

I tossed a minnow-shaped crankbait into likely looking places while I drifted, catching an occasional small bass. Several other anglers I passed, some wading, some in boats, were doing better. I spoke with them all, and they all were using hellgrammites.

Hellgrammites were a popular bait on the middle Allegheny River while I was a kid, but there everyone thought that the best smallmouth bait was soft-shelled crabs, which we called crayfish. I do not recall learning that our crabs were really crayfish until high school biology.

Crayfish are certainly the most widely recognized great smallmouth bass bait. However, in many areas they ignore the soft-shelled stage.

How well I recall catching my first lunker smallmouth—they were lunkers then, before they became hawgs—while fishing at night in the Buckaloons Eddy. I collected soft-shells in the shallow water. Then after sundown the oldtimers came down the river bank to fish. We sat on boulders and watched our rods, which were set on forked sticks. I was taught to let the bass run with the bait, stop, and when they ran again to set the hook.

I knew this bass was special the instant I set the hook. Instead of rocketing toward the
If it came to a vote, I would vote for soft-shelled crayfish, because sometimes it appears that smallmouths feed selectively on them. Yet I will continue to collect hellgrammites from a secret place in the Little Brokenstraw. If I am on the Juniata and my fishing partner has a bucket of stonecats I’ll lip-hook one. I’ll buy a bucket of emerald shiners now and then. I’ll use riffle runners in the middle Allegheny, and I will not make fun of anyone who wants to use leeches or ‘crawlers.

Chuck Beatty with a 5-pound Lake Erie smallmouth bass.

If they caught that night, it ran to the main channel and slugged it out in deep water. It weighed four pounds and measured 18 inches long.

After the completion of Kinzua Dam, the crayfish population declined in the middle Allegheny, and the popularity of using them as bait declined. Now, below the mouth of Conewango Creek, there are again abundant crayfish in the Allegheny.

Relatively few anglers use them as bait, though, and as far as I know none of the local bait shops sells them.

Down on the Juniata folks know that the stonecat is the best smallmouth bait. It would seem that those sharp spines in the dorsal and pectoral fins would discourage predators from eating them, but it doesn’t with smallmouths in the Juniata.

“Toss one into the water and you can see smallmouths make a wake for a hundred feet to get at it,” I was told.

Well, I never yet saw that happen. But I admit that Juniata smallmouths have a taste for stonecats. The strange thing about this is that I have never had a bit of luck with stonecats outside the Juniata drainage. Maybe I just have not given them a fair try. Yet, there does seem to be a regionalism to the best smallmouth bait. What is good in one place might not be worth a hoot in another.

I would never argue that emerald shiners are not the very best smallmouth bait up at Lake Erie.

Pennsylvania is blessed with several waterways that are inhabited by outstanding smallmouth bass populations. Serious smallmouth anglers all over the country know about the Susquehanna, the Allegheny and the Juniata. Still, none of these can compare with the number and size of the smallmouths in our 45-mile long section of the Great Lakes.

Probably as much because they are inexpensive, and the most common bait in bait shops, except for nightcrawlers, emeralds have become the best smallmouth bait.

Riffle Runner

And they most certainly are excellent smallmouth bait during the first few weeks of bass season when it is cool enough to keep emeralds alive in minnow buckets.

Like all of the “best” smallmouth baits, emerald shiners are native to the water where they are considered the best bait. This offers a valuable lesson about smallmouths that can even be applied to using artificial lures. Give them something they expect to see. Use natural colors. In my experience this becomes more important as the fishing gets tougher, and as fishing pressure increases.

Just as there is disagreement from place to place over which smallmouth bait is best, so do anglers in any one place disagree. Not surprising. Most of the better smallmouth waters are inhabited by more than one popular bait.
Likewise, you will find some people who swear by leeches. They are not a traditional bait in Pennsylvania, having become locally popular only after they were touted by numerous national magazine articles as the new "super bait." Though significantly more expensive and harder to find in bait shops, leeches tend to last longer on the hook.

This list could continue a long way. Some anglers have other specific minnow preferences. Junebugs were a popular bait 30 years ago, and probably still are somewhere. Though more often thought of as trout bait, grasshoppers, crickets and other insects make fine smallmouth bait.

So what is the absolute best smallmouth bass bait? Any of these baits I have mentioned might be the best. I believe that the best bait is not so much the bait itself as who is using it. But that sounds like something a politician would say.

If it came to a vote, I would vote for soft-shelled crayfish, because sometimes it appears that smallmouths feed selectively on them. Yet I will continue to collect hellgrammites from a secret place in the Little Brokenstraw. If I am on the Juniata and my fishing partner has a bucket of stonecats I'll lip-hook one. I'll buy a bucket of emerald shiners now and then. I'll use riffle runners in the middle Allegheny, and I will not make fun of anyone who wants to use leeches or 'crawlers.

Emerald shiners

Emerald shiners are one of the most abundant and widespread minnows in the country, but in Pennsylvania they are confined to the western quarter of the state. They are major forage for gamefish at Lake Erie and the Allegheny Reservoir. Slender, shiny and as long as five inches, they can be found in huge schools.

Sometimes emerald shiners can be caught in minnow traps or drop nets, but most are bought at bait shops. They are relatively inexpensive, especially close to Lake Erie.

The major shortcoming of emerald shiners is that they are fragile. They do not survive any rough handling or warm water. Do not crowd them in a minnow bucket. Keep them cool and well aerated.

Hook emerald shiners through the lips or between the dorsal fin and tail. They usually struggle toward the surface, so a little weight is needed to get them down to the smallmouths. A leadhead or jiggling spoon tipped with an emerald shiner is an excellent rig in deep water. In Lake Erie, smallmouths are often caught in 25 to 45 feet of water.

Hellgrammites

Hellgrammites are the larval form of the Dobson fly, a large, four-winged insect that in adult form resembles the fearsome-looking hellgrammite. Males have large but harmless mandibles.
Nonetheless, when one lands on the back of your neck while you are night fishing, your first thought will be of vampires.

Hellgrammites can be caught by hand, searching for them by turning over rocks. But a minnow seine is much more efficient. Just disturb the bottom enough to dislodge the hellgrammites from their hiding places upstream from the seine, and they will drift into the seine. I have had the best success in gentle riffles, not swift whitewater, with a rock-and-gravel bottom.

Use a size 6 or 8 fine-wire hook to impale a hellgrammite through the "collar." The collar, actually a part of the body called the thorax, is located just behind the head. In smaller creeks and anytime the water is no more than about four feet deep, do not use a sinker. This ensures a natural drift. If you need to get the bait deeper, or you need more weight for casting, use just enough splitshot to get the job done. You do not want to anchor a hellgrammite on the bottom. Hellgrammites are not good bait for still-fishing on the bottom because they crawl under rocks. Keep them drifting.

Store hellgrammites in a covered container. Put enough water in the container to cover the hellgrammites. The container should not be airtight.

Riffle runners

"Riffle runner" is a local name for the streamline chub. Its range is spotty, occurring in Pennsylvania only in the northwest corner. Its habitat is moderate to swift current over a rock-and-gravel bottom.

Anglers who use riffle runners usually catch their own using a small barbless hook baited with a small piece of worm. They are typically four to five inches long. Store them in a minnow bucket, preferably kept right in the river so they are cool and well aerated.

For drifting, lip hook the chub. Use no weight or a light splitshot. For still-fishing in deeper water, hook the chub near the tail. This keeps it lively. Weight is not necessary unless you want to anchor the bait in one particular place.

Soft-shelled crayfish

Crayfish are abundant just about everywhere smallmouth bass live. The soft-shell stage occurs just after this crustacean sheds its shell. Like other shelled creatures, they shed their shells to grow. For a while after the shell is shed, the new shell that was developing beneath the old shell is soft. In this stage a crayfish is helpless because the muscles are attached to the shell. It cannot move quickly or use its pinchers until the shell hardens.

Hook a soft-shell in the fleshy part of the tail. This avoids the vital organs, so it will remain alive.

In a current use just enough weight to keep the crayfish on the bottom. Or let it drift in the current with or without weight, depending on water depth. Keep it close to the bottom where smallmouths generally forage. Still-fish in calm water without additional weight. It takes a few seconds longer for the bait to sink to the bottom, but it is worth the wait.

You can keep soft-shells in a bucket of water, but they will quickly harden. Bait dealers store them in sphagnum moss in a refrigerator.

Stonecats

Among the smaller members of the catfish family, stonecats and madtoms—most anglers cannot differentiate between them—are found throughout the state. On the Juniata River where they are popular, though they call them stonecats, anglers are actually using margined madtoms, a species common along the Atlantic states from New York to Georgia.

“The local boys mesh them together,” Commission Area 7 Fisheries Manager Larry Jackson says.

They live in moderate to swift current over the rock-and-gravel bottom in rivers and creeks.

“Stonecats” can be collected easily with a seine. Just disturb the bottom upstream from the seine. They are heartier and easier to store than many baitfish. Still, keep their water cool and well aerated.

Lip-hook “stonecats.” No weight is necessary because they head straight toward the bottom when they hit the water. In fact, you will have to move them frequently to keep them from getting under stones.

June 1995 Pennsylvania Angler
Tohickon Creek, Ralph Stover State Park

Southeast Pennsylvania Smallmouth Streams
by Vic Attardo

Just before the current sharply accelerates and turns an abrupt corner into the wide river, a watery field of lawn-chair size rocks and broken tree limbs lies where the creek makes its last stand as a separate entity. Below that sudden twist few men—without goat hooves for feet—dare to tread. But in the more moderate current, one can wade from bank to bank with relative ease. And in this restrained but quirky water a mob of broad-backed, tiger-striped smallmouth bass lives by ambushing anything of consumable value that enters its home.

The hard-fighting smallmouth has many qualities, but shyness is not one of them. An aggressive predator, often at the top of the food chain in a fast-flowing stream, the smallmouth feeds on a variety of creatures including, aquatic insects, crustaceans and small fish. Because it is not in its nature to pass up an easy meal, this hearty appetite plus a domineering spirit makes the smallmouth a cooperative target for the knowledgeable angler.

I have great respect for smallmouth bass and willingly forgo rushing to a short-lived hatch to spend the entire day with the more eager and numerous smallmouth. From early June to just after the leaves drop in the fall, a streambred smallmouth is my favorite target. And here, in the southeastern corner of the state, I have plenty of productive waters to try.

Southeast Pennsylvania Smallmouth Streams

1. Tohickon Creek, Bucks County. Bucks County's Tohickon Valley Park downstream to the Delaware River at Point Pleasant.
3. East Branch Perkiomen Creek. Bucks/Montgomery counties NE. Extension of the Turnpike to Schwenksville.
4. West Branch Perkiomen Creek, Montgomery County. Berks/Montgomery County line to Green Lane Reservoir.
5. Perkiomen Creek, Montgomery County. Upper Perkiomen Valley Park to Lower Perkiomen Valley Park.
6. Swamp Creek, Montgomery County. Egleysville Road to mouth at Route 73.
7. Manatawny Creek, Berks/Montgomery counties. Pine Forge area to mouth near Pottstown.
8. Sacoony Creek, Berks County. Virginville at Route 143 to State Game Lands 182.
9. Maiden Creek, Berks County. Lenhartsville, Route 22, down to Route 662.
10. Little Schuylkill River, Schuylkill County. Route 61 to mouth at Port Clinton.
11. Brandywine Creek, Chester County. Route 842 above Lenape to state line. Also West Branch from Coatsville, Route 30, to Route 842.
12. Darby Creek, Delaware County. Darby borough vicinity.

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Indeed, within the range of thousands of anglers are miles of productive smallmouth fishing. Though the bass are rarely trophy sized, their numbers and fighting quality are an adequate trade. Within an hour’s drive of Philadelphia and the Lehigh Valley, fishermen have about a dozen streams in the Delaware River drainage with notable smallmouth fishing. What’s more, even though many anglers complain that the trout streams are too crowded and the boat launches too busy, stream smallmouth fishermen rarely feel hemmed in. Access can be a problem in some developed areas, but the resourceful sportsman can find plenty of roadside pulloffs to reach the water. Many of the southeastern streams have county or municipal parks along some sections, and once on the stream you are limited only to where your feet will take you.

Mike Kaufmann, Commission Area 6 Fisheries Manager, gives five of these streams a flat-out “good” rating. On his list-and mine—the Tohickon, Manatawny, Brandywine, the West Branch of Perkiomen as well as the main branch of the Perkiomen Creek, all rate highly. Comparing Kaufmann’s assessment and my experience, others like the Perkiomen’s East Branch, Sacoony Creek, Maiden Creek and the lower portions of the Little Schuylkill River rate fair to good. Only the Neshaminy and Darby Creek get a lower rating, but I have spoken to one fisherman who says portions of the Neshaminy are a real sleeper, and he had pictures to prove it.

Throughout the Delaware drainage, smallmouth bass range from six to 13 inches in length, but I have found that the best-rated streams can push the envelope two to three inches. Anything over 15 inches in this area is something to write home about.

Early in the afternoon, either branch of Perkiomen or Manatawny creeks would be my choice for a solid outing. The waters of both streams contain all the nooks and crannies that smallmouth love and their deeper pools hold some of the largest smallmouth to be found in the southeast.

Viable smallmouth fishing on the Perkiomen extends from Green Lane downstream to Montgomery County’s Lower Perkiomen Valley Park. Some of the best holding water is between Green Lane and Collegeville along Route 29.

An absolutely magical place to fish on the Perkiomen is above Spring Mount. One can launch a canoe or inflatable boat at the dam and paddle upstream into some deep, fertile water. There are big boulders in portions of this stream and smallmouth bass. Large rock bass and redear sunfish also find ample food and protection. Just watch out for people swinging from tree ropes or jumping off an abandoned railroad trestle into swimming holes that have been used for generations.

Another productive area is the East Branch of the Perkiomen below the town of Sellersville. Even though portions of the creek receive a spring and fall trout stocking, the lower East Branch, toward Venfield and Route 63, is actually smallmouth/sunfish territory. This is a rapidly developing area, but the adventurous some angler should have long stretches of this shallow stream all to himself. One problem, however, is that anything over 11 or 12 inches in this stretch is likely to be a sucker or carp.

Working upstream from the Delaware River—a smallmouth factory in its own right—anglers can find a similar watershed on Tohickon Creek up to Bucks County’s Tohickon Valley Park. Starting at the park on the north side of the creek, the Tohickon reminds one of a Pocono trout stream with its fast water and short, deep pockets. But because the water warms quickly in the spring, this stretch is the home of numerous small smallmouth bass.

Downstream, the Tohickon widens considerably, taking on the character and quality of other fine smallmouth creeks of the area. By way of the county park, the Ralph Stover Park farther upstream, and a small memorial park on the south side off Route 32, the walking fisherman can reach some good water. The memorial park also provides access to the mouth of the Tohickon at the Delaware, a very exciting place to fish.

Even though its official nomenclature is that of a river, the Little Schuylkill above Route 61 at Port Clinton is more stream-like and can hold the larger bass that occasionally move up from the main Schuylkill River. To reach good water, disembark near the intersection of routes 61 and 895 and make your way, creatively, to the river. Here the Little Schuylkill is broad and shallow and flows along at a good tempo. In this zone you’ll have to look for shoreline pockets and midstream eddies to find the fish. Below where the highway crosses the tributary, the channel narrows considerably and wading becomes a bit trickier as the stream parallels the road. But some quick-striking smallmouths live in the shadows of this boulder-strewn section, and because they don’t have the luxury of scanning a fly or lure for every imperfection, you quickly learn whether or not they’re on the feed.

One general rule for determining where to fish these southeastern streams for smallmouth bass is to locate the area where the Fish and Boat Commission stocks trout, and work around it. Most of these put-and-take creeks are unsuitable as holdover waters because the temperature rises as they make their way south and east to the main rivers. In these unstocked sections smallmouth fishermen should spend the most effort.

One notable exception to the south and east rule is the Sacoony Creek in Berks County. The Sacoony receives a trout stocking from just above Kutztown and Route 222 to the village of Bowers. But from Virginville, at Route 143, upstream to State Game Lands 182 is an enjoyable, if somewhat sporadic, holder of smallmouth bass.
Location

I succeed in smallmouth fishing much the same way as it is in today's business world. The first thing one should consider is location. Once on the stream I search for the holes, pockets and stone fields that make up good smallmouth holding water. In most cases, I'm seeking a moderate current and a place where the fish can hide. Often these sites can be quite subtle in appearance.

Some of the keys I look for include a minor color change from light to darker water; a calm area beside some white froth or a flat, mirror-like eddy along a quicker run. In these locations I most often locate a bass.

One of the bigger mistakes anglers make is to waste in too far too fast. Most fishermen take great care in working the opposite bank from where they entered the water. But the first bank that should be worked is the one at their feet.

One of the neater tricks I use is to fish back toward where I started. Say, for example, you are up to your thighs in the center of the stream and have been casting to the far bank, taking some good fish. When you think things have quieted down behind you, turn to your "home" bank and rework that side of the stream. You'll be amazed to find that a fish or two you probably disturbed entering the creek has slid back to its regular haunt and is ready to attack your lure.

It was a quirky occurrence, but I still remember the three-pounder, one of the biggest fish of last fall, that came out of the Tohickon next to a rock I had climbed over 20 minutes before.

Method

My preferred method for taking stream smallmouth, particularly in the low water conditions of late summer and early fall, is with a fly rod. But I am not adverse to drifting a large, juicy hellgrammite into a smallmouth's lair to raise an uncoopera­
tive fish. It's amazing how quickly they become interested!

In the past few years I have dropped some weight—that is, the weight of my fly rod. I once followed conventional wisdom and boomed my fly across the water with an 8-weight rod, but I have since reduced myself to a 5-weight for this small stream work. Not only is the fight better, the thinner line also makes for easier line control. I reserve the 7-weight and 8-weight rods for windy days and I wouldn't work the brawling Delaware with anything less than the seven. But for streams whose average width is some 60 feet, the lighter rod is more enjoyable.

Because these streams are often low and their waters very clear, I prefer long leaders of nine to 11 feet, including tippet. Some fly rodders might be asking which leader size one should use on a 5-weight to turn over the weighted flies used to fish smallmouth bass. The answer lies in the weather.

If I'm lucky enough to be fishing a breezeless evening, then a 4X tippet does the job. But if the wind is blowing in my face, I need a little extra umph on the end of my line, which is a 3X and a shorter leader nicely supplies. Sometimes with the light leader the fly curls under the last few inches of tippet when it drops to the water. I find this situation acceptable, if somewhat annoying, because I know I get more strikes on a lighter line. Remember, on truly breezy days, the 7-weight rod comes out of the truck.

Fly selection

Fly selection for stream smallmouth bass doesn't have to be too sophisticated. Olive and black Woolly Buggers, plus rubber-legged Bitch Creek Nymphs, black and brown stonefly and hellgrammite imitations, Muddler Minnows, and generic streamers, all in sizes 6 and 8, plus small popping bugs like the Sneaky Pete, sizes 6 in chartreuse or white, are all producers.

But my "don't leave home without it fly" is a white Goat Hair Minnow, a cousin of Shenk's White Minnow. Unlike Shenk's excellent creation, made with rabbit or Arctic Fox tied with a dubbing loop, I bind the goat hair or lamb's wool to the hook shank. The thick underfur is packed around the hook but not spun. I also tie the rounded body of my fly right up to the eye of the hook, which gives it the "walk-the-dog" action of a Zara Spook. Shenk ties a traditional thread head on his fly.

An important factor in fly selection is the type of water I plan to fish. Fortunately, most of the streams I work are perfect for the styles and sizes noted above. But when I begin at the top of a shallow riffle, a big weighted fly might be too much. Then I go to a trout-size fly, like a number 12 Gold-Ribbed Hair's Ear with light or dark shading. The water at the head of a fast run usually won't hold the largest fish, and I can work a smaller fly through the lip of a riffle much slower than a larger fly. By taking a small fish or two, I can also get a quick read on whether I should be using bright or neutral flies for my day's work. When I get to where the bigger bruisers live in the middle of the run, I pretty much know what I should be feeding the fish in terms of color.

All of my flies are weighted except, of course, the popping bugs and some floating Muddlers. Muddlers that I wish to sink I tie with wool heads—a very effective fly, I might add.

As for fly lines, my choice is equally simple. Because these waters are relatively shallow, a floating line is all I ever use. My sink tips and sinking lines are reserved for the big rivers.

More on location

The part of the run where the current begins to lose some velocity and gains some depth is the area I call "sweet spot"—borrowing a phrase used by fly tiers to denote the best area on a feather to find quality hackles. The angler who wants consistent success in smallmouth bass fishing should learn to identify the sweet spot and give it the most attention. Often it can be recognized as that part of the run where the rocks seem more spread out and the stream widens ever so slightly. The head of the riffle may contain the most obstructions and have a quicker current; the end of the run is usually shallow or contains a narrow channel before entering a pool; the sweet spot is somewhere in the middle and in a good stream holds a bass around every rock.

After giving such advice it might seem contradictory to say that the angler should not ignore any likely water in a stream, but that's the way it is in smallmouth fishing. Even the shallowest tailouts can be good places to fish when smallmouth bass are chasing minnows against a stream bank.

Even though many anglers complain about the crowded conditions on the famous trout streams and others wait on weekends for a position on the ramp, stream smallmouth bass anglers rarely have those worries. The southeastern corner of the state is full of people but its smallmouth streams are only full of one thing—smallmouth bass.
Caddis Flies

Caddis flies are aquatic insects found in nearly all of Pennsylvania’s waters. Some caddis species are at home in small mountain streams, while others prefer the depths of our large rivers and lakes. Like butterflies and moths, caddises go through complete metamorphosis. Use the letters ELPA to help remember the four stages in complete metamorphosis: Egg, larva, pupa and adult.

**Egg**

Each egg is very small and round. One egg is about the size of the period at the end of this sentence. Depending on species, the female lays the eggs in clusters of 30 to 300 eggs. The clumps stick to the bottom and hatch in two to four weeks.

**Larva**

Caddis larvae look much like worms with six legs. The larvae produce silk, and many use it to build protective cases. They make tube or purse-shaped cases out of grains of sand, sticks and other vegetation. One species makes a case that looks like a snail shell. Some species carry the case. Others attach it to rocks. Larvae crawl on the rocks eating algae and other plants. A few species build silken nets to filter food out of the water. In many Pennsylvania streams there is a green-colored caddis larva that is a predator. It does not build a case.

**Pupa**

Nearly a year after it hatches, the larva constructs a cocoon. The larva enters the cocoon and becomes a pupa. A pair of wings develops while inside the cocoon. After about two weeks in the cocoon the pupa appears and swims to the surface. For each kind of caddis this happens at the same time each year.

**Adult**

Many adults emerge from the pupae just below the water’s surface. Others emerge on the surface. Fish gobble both the emerging pupae and the adults. Adult caddis flies look much like small moths. The adults fly to trees and bushes along the water and after several days will mate there. After mating, the female flies her fertilized eggs to the water. Depending on the species, the egg clusters are deposited on the surface or the female swims the clusters to the bottom. Adult caddis flies often live for months after mating.
Topwater lures are prime because river bass feed in shallower water more often than their lake-bound cousins.
The morning fog clung to the hilltops, keeping the river shrouded in a damp mist. I tugged at the collar of my fleece pullover trying to cover my chilled ears before making the next cast.

Pitching the tube jig toward the stone lockwall, I followed it with the rod tip as it bounced along the bottom. It stopped unexpectedly before reaching the boat. In automatic mode I snapped the rod upward. The weight on the zigzagging line indicated a respectable fish, but it wasn’t until it started climbing for the surface that I knew for sure it was a smallmouth.

Then, in one of those unexplainable twists in fishing, the bass spit the jig at the side of the boat. But not before I had a clear view of the smallie.

“Gosh,” I stammered to my fishing partner. “Did you see the size of that bass? Must have been close to four pounds! A river smallie of four pounds!”

Had we been fishing a rural section of a pristine river, I would not have been surprised. But we were on the Allegheny River within sight of downtown Pittsburgh.

Ten years earlier I had caught football-size 12- to 14-inch largemouths while fishing a tournament on the Monongahela near Ten Mile Creek. Having just enjoyed a tussle with a big smallmouth, and reflecting back to that day on the Mon, I scratched my head and wondered why it took me a decade to schedule this fishing trip to the heart of Golden Triangle.

Three Rivers perspective

Three Rivers bass fishing is hot! There is no other way to describe it. I’m not going to argue it’s the best bass fishery in the state, but it is a far cry from 30 years ago when little more than carp and bullheads lived in the severely degraded water.

Three Rivers is the term applied to the navigational pools of the Monongahela, Allegheny and Ohio rivers in the greater Pittsburgh area. The slow-moving Mon flows north from the coal mining region of West Virginia. Cutting a southward path through rolling hills, the Allegheny River has a steeper gradient yielding a faster flow. The meeting of the two rivers gives birth to the Ohio River, which meanders northwest before turning southwest.

At one time steel plants, refineries and related industries lined the shores of the Mon and Ohio with both rivers used as dumping grounds for waste. The Allegheny was not exempt from industrial and mining pollution problems, either. In addition, all three received more than their share of improperly treated sewage. For years the rivers in the Pittsburgh vicinity were considered dead waterways.

Things change—sometimes for the better. Fortunately, that was the case for Three Rivers, which has undergone a remarkable improvement as a result of clean water legislation. Clean enough to drink directly from the river? Hardly. But enough to support increased baitfish and gamefish populations.

“Fabulous—that’s how bass fishing is described on the rivers these days,” says Ernie Pate, Jr., a river basser for over a decade. “The bass population increased steadily in the 1980s. Smallmouths dominate, but there are some largemouths up the Mon. Spotted bass are advancing up the Allegheny and Mon from the Ohio. However, spots aren’t as consistent year to year as the smallmouths.”

On weekdays when fishing pressure is light, Pate often manages to catch and release 25 to 30 bass. The bass typically range from nine to 14 inches, with larger ones occasionally caught.

“All three rivers have come a long way in the last 10 years,” says Nick Mellon, chairman of the Keystone Bass Association and a Coast Guard certified guide on the Three Rivers. “Bass catches have improved tremendously, and that has increased the fishing pressure. Now, instead of area anglers running to distant lakes, they stay around home to fish the rivers. Plus, we see more and more anglers from outside the area viewing Three Rivers as a bass fishing destination. But that’s okay. There are more than 300 miles of navigation pools to investigate.”

Even though Mellon, Pate and many others have played catch and release with Three Rivers bass for a dozen years, a handful of anglers discovered the developing gold mine over 20 years ago.

One summer afternoon in 1972, Red Bailey and a friend launched a johnboat in a back channel of the Allegheny near Harmarville. They made their way upriver to the lowhead dam at Lock 3 before starting to fish.

“I had a Big O tied on because it was the hot new lure,” recalls Bailey. “We started drifting downriver. I immediately hooked a huge smallmouth in the swift current. Following what seemed like an eternal battle, I landed the fish. We didn’t have scales, but it weighed between five and six pounds. Although it was bigger than any smallmouth I had ever caught, I released the trophy. I haven’t caught anything that large since—anywhere in the state, including Erie.”

Shortly after that, Bailey’s friend stumbled into a few large-
mouth bass on the Mon near Elizabeth. In a flash the first bass club in western Pennsylvania was born—the Golden Triangle Bassmasters. This small group had the rivers pretty much to themselves for several years until other serious bassers uncovered the expanding fishery. “River bass fishing has only gotten better over time,” says Bailey. “But I don’t know if I’ll ever see another six-pounder in the river!”

Biologist’s assessment

As Commission Area 8 Fisheries Manager for the southwest district, Rick Lorson’s responsibilities include the Mon, Ohio and the lower Allegheny.

“Bass are doing well in Three Rivers, but as with any river fishery, environmental conditions come into play and may drastically affect the future population. Spawning success in rivers is based largely on water flow. High water or floods can wipe out a year class. Drier years are better from a spawning aspect for both bass and forage fish. When we get large year classes like 1989, 1991 and 1993, they show up as improving bass fishing for three or four years down the road.”

The Allegheny has a higher density of smallmouths than the Ohio or Mon. Even though the water is better than it was a quarter-century ago, the Mon continues to suffer from some mine drainage and silt. Yet, samplings undertaken by Lorson in the lower three pools of the Mon in recent years show a good smallmouth population. Spotted bass are now found in all three rivers, but are mainly concentrated in the Ohio.

When asked what happened to the exceptional largemouth fishing in the Mon during the early 1980s, Lorson offered this explanation.

“Pockets of largemouths have always existed in the Mon because the navigational pools are longer, the water is slower, and the water temperature is warmer compared to the Allegheny and Ohio. During the early 1980s, the Three Rivers were experiencing an increase in baitfish. Largemouths were already in the Mon, so they were able to reap the benefit of the rapidly expanding baitfish populations. Therefore, football-size largemouths were prevalent for a few years. But as smallmouths, white bass, sauger and walleyes migrated up the Mon in the following years, largemouths had to compete with additional species for the same forage. The Mon is more in balance now.”

And what about the forage in the rivers? Is it the same for all three rivers?

Lorson says that each river is a slightly different environment that supports different baitfish. The Mon is primarily gizzard shad and emerald shiners. Bluntnose minnows and spotfin shiners hold the third spot. On pools 3, 4 and 5 of the Allegheny River, it’s bluntnose minnows, spotfin shiners and log perch, and to a lesser degree gizzard shad and emerald shiners. On the Ohio, some years gizzard shad dominate and other years it’s emerald shiners.

Finding Your Way on 3R

For anyone not intimately familiar with the greater Pittsburgh area, finding access to the rivers can be an intimidating experience. If you don’t know exactly where you are going, it will turn into an urban driving nightmare with boat in tow.

The following items are absolutely necessary:

(1) A Pennsylvania road map and a detailed greater Pittsburgh road map. (2) The Commission’s Guide to Public Fishing Waters and Boating Access, which provides the best detail of each access areas on the river. The cost is $2.12 postpaid including state sales tax. Contact the Commission Magazines/Publications Section, P.O. Box 67000, Harrisburg, PA 17106-7000.

(3) River charts. Detailed nautical charts may be obtained from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1000 Liberty Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15222; phone 412-644-6872—DB.
Baitfish variety contributes to sustained bass growth. If the entire river system were dependent on one baitfish species, that could spell trouble if a year class of that species failed.

To catch a bass

Pate, Mellon and Bailey all agree—their preferred lure presentation for Three Rivers bass is topwater. For these anglers, surface baits account for a significant number of bass every season. Topwater lures are prime because river bass feed in shallower water more often than their lake counterparts.

Most Three Rivers anglers claim the best topwater bite is late September into mid-October. But that doesn’t stop knowledgeable anglers from churning up the surface whenever their experience tells them there is a high probability of success with topwater.

Every morning that Bailey finds himself on the river, he throws a chugger until the sun is directly overhead. Under certain weather conditions, Mellon tosses either a buzzbait or chugger all day long. Pate uses chuggers to cover expanses of water looking for groups of active bass. All anglers suggest a topwater lure be tied on one rod at all times for the unexpected “jumps.” Jumps occur when a group of bass attacks a baitfish school on the surface. This may happen anytime from June to mid-October.

There are, of course, times when bass simply do not come to the surface. Here are additional tips from our expert river rats on lure presentations for those situations.

According to Mellon, when the season opens in June, bass are congregated at outflows and gravel bars to feed on minnows. “They are really stacked up at key sites,” says Mellon. “This can be a good time for topwater. But if that does not work, try swimming a grub or four-inch worm.”

“During the first week of August, bass can be found in moving water on current breaks,” says Mellon. “This is the time to fish a crankbait or perhaps a spinbait.”

“If I can’t trigger strikes with topwater, I switch to tube jigs or four-inch worms,” says Pate, who finds it hard to put down his favorite chugger. Soft-plastic jigs and worms are excellent for targeting objects that create a resting site for bass. Besides typical current breakers like rock piles and log jams, navigational rivers feature dock pilings, mooring posts, metal waffle walls, bridge abutments and lots of corners.

Rigged weedless, soft-plastic baits are good for probing cover. “I tend to find spots in heavier cover than smallmouths,” says Pate. “Smallmouths are more likely to relate to rocks than spots.”

When the topwater bite isn’t happening, Bailey usually switches to a four-inch worm. He prefers to fish the worm on a jighead, instead of a slip-sinker Texas rig. A leadhead provides a better vertical drop for the worm, as well as better control in current situations.

Creek mouths are among Bailey’s favorite haunts. Each tributary forms an outwash delta. This bar serves as the dining table for baitfish schools. With bait present, bass are close at hand.

“Here’s a surefire tactic when nothing else seems to be working,” says Bailey. “Head upstream to the area below the next lowhead dam and fish an in-line spinner in the tailwater. Use a heavy blade so you can feel it thump on the retrieve. This is the best guarantee for smallmouths in the Three Rivers.”

Fishing is not without drawbacks on Three Rivers. Although there are some public and private access ramps, few are as convenient or spacious as ones typically found on other lakes and rivers around the state. During pleasant summer days, travel on the river is encumbered by heavy boat traffic. Small aluminum fishing boats and low-profile bass boats run the risk of being swamped by wakes from barges and cruise ships.

And to move from one navigational pool to another by water, there are the locks to contend with. Learn what is required to lock through ahead of time, and keep in mind that recreational boaters receive the lowest priority.

Lowhead dams (an extension of each lock) present another danger. During boating season, barge markers mark the danger area. Obey them. Maintain a proper lookout at all times.

Even with drawbacks, Three Rivers is a waterway you do not want to overlook. It’s part of Pennsylvania’s bass fishing.

Locking Through on 3R

The lock-and-dam system on Three Rivers is managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Government and commercial craft have top priority. Sport anglers and recreational boaters are on the lowest rung. It’s not a first-come, first-serve deal. An approaching tug contacts the lockmaster by radio and lower priority boats must wait until the commercial traffic arrives and is locked through. With multiple barges, this may take well over an hour.

To lock through, small boats must have at least 100 feet of rope and boat fenders to protect against the lock walls. Each boat occupant must wear a PFD.

Small-craft operators signal the lockmaster with a pull of the rope at the end of the lockwall. After signaling, back off several hundred feet to await light signals. A red light means wait. An amber light means approach the lock under full control—not full throttle. Green means enter the lock chamber.

The boat rope is passed to a lock worker on the top of the wall. The worker loops the rope around a stanchion and drops the tag end back to the boat. Large boats require two ropes.

Boat operators must maintain control of the ropes as the water level goes up or down. A short blast means that you have permission to leave the chamber.—DB.

15-Inch Limit

Commenting in 1995, Pool 3 on the Allegheny River will be under special Big Bass regulations, which includes a 15-inch minimum size.

According to Lorson, the Big Bass regulation was established on Pool 3 as an experiment to see if the smallmouth population will respond to its full growth potential.

“Pools 3 and 4 have the highest density of smallmouths in the lower Allegheny River,” says Lorson. “However, my surveys provided evidence that few smallmouths were making it over 12 inches and fewer yet over 15 inches, this despite good water quality and ample forage.

“Because of good boat access, Pool 3 is one of the most heavily fished pools on the river. It appears the 12-inch minimum size is resulting in high harvest. Therefore, a higher minimum size was placed on this pool to see how the smallmouth population responds.”

Will the 15-inch size be expanded to the entire Three Rivers area?

“We are waiting to see what kind of fishery response we get on Pool 3 before applying it to other pools. I do not anticipate applying the regulation to every pool, but there may be other pools where it is applicable, too,” Lorson says.—DB.
Penns Creek: One of a Kind

Penns Creek, eastern Centre County, is known for its large brown trout, healthy insect populations (especially the Green Drake hatch), ample public access, and gorgeous scenery. But Penns Creek is now recognized for another reason. A stretch of water from Coburn downstream to the catch-and-release area below Swift Run in Poe Paddy State Park is now a one-of-a-kind special regulation area.

The regulations assigned to this area are essentially the current Trophy Trout regulations, but without tackle restrictions. From the opening day of the season through Labor Day, anglers can use the rod, reel and bait of their choice to harvest two trout per day with a minimum size of 14 inches. In addition, anglers are permitted to pursue other species in accordance with standard inland regulations. However, possession of a signed trout/salmon stamp is necessary to fish in this area regardless of the methods used or species pursued.

While many anglers prefer fewer sets of regulatory exceptions, this area holds promise of possible expansion to other areas. If this area is successful, it will offer anglers maximum recreational potential while protecting trout. Of all items in a special trout regulation package, tackle restrictions are often the root of controversy. That element has been removed in this program, and if anglers prove its success, we may see these regulations on other Commonwealth waters.—WCO Brian Burger, Centre County.

New State Record Sucker

The state record for sucker has been broken twice since the beginning of the year.

John Cernick, Pittsburgh, was first to break the old record with his catch on February 1. His fish beat the old state record by 6.2 ounces—weighing 11 pounds, 7.2 ounces and measuring 31 1/8 inches long with a 17-inch girth. Cernick was fishing the Allegheny River, Venango County, when the brute attacked his jig.

Cernick's record was shattered on March 14 by a fish caught by Endeavor resident Troy Bemis. Bemis's fish, taken from the Allegheny River in Forest County, tipped the scales at a whopping 12 pounds, 9 ounces. The fish, caught on a worm, was 30 + inches in length with a girth of 18 1/4 inches.
Special regulations on Kettle Creek

I am 77 years old and an avid fisherman. I recently read the "Survey of Trout Fishing in Pennsylvania" in my November 1993 Angler. I agree with the majority of people who were interviewed for the survey. I selected my fishing site because it was close to my camp and in a nice environment.

My two favorite waters are Kettle Creek and Cross Fork Creek. However, I am now semi-disabled and unable to fish most of Cross Fork Creek, which is restricted to fly fishing. My question is, if I am not able to fish bait that stream, why are other fishermen allowed to fish flies in streams such as Kettle Creek? This seems like discrimination against older people who cannot move around as well to get to these areas.

I will continue to fish in Pennsylvania, and hope you will continue to do the good job of keeping the fishing at its present high level.—Art Fogel, Moorestown, NJ.

The regulations on catch-and-release waters state that angling may be done with barbless artificial lures only (including spinners, flies and streamers) and all trout caught must be immediately returned to the stream. The 5.4-mile fly-fishing-only area on Cross Fork Creek is indeed more exclusive with respect to tackle restrictions. However, we currently have an area on Cross Fork Creek proposed for the new Selective Harvest program. This will enhance the current wild trout fishery by implementing a larger minimum size limit on wild brown trout and reducing the daily creel limit for all trout species. If this program is approved, it would include management under the artificial-lures-only concept and would allow more anglers to enjoy this fine fishery.

The majority of the Kettle Creek drainage is managed under conventional regulations, which permit a variety of tackle types. The reason behind gear restrictions on special regulation areas is to avoid the high hooking mortality rates that are associated with the use of bait. Managing special regulation areas under an artificial-lures-only concept gives more anglers the opportunity to participate, as compared to fly-fishing only, while maintaining the low hooking mortality rates necessary for a quality fisheries.—R. Thomas Greene, Coldwater Unit Leader.

Commission Signs Appalachian Clean Streams Initiative

The Fish and Boat Commission has signed a Statement of Mutual Intent supporting the Appalachian Clean Streams Initiative. The Statement of Mutual Intent outlines concerns shared by the states of Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia with improving streams that have been polluted by drainage from abandoned coal mines (acid mine drainage—AMD). The non-binding agreement pledges increased cooperation and partnerships among federal, state and local governments and other private and public groups.

A major goal of the clean-up plan is to increase the exchange of information and eliminate duplicate efforts among local, state and federal government agencies working on AMD projects.

The Appalachian Clean Streams Initiative traces its roots to 1977 when President Jimmy Carter signed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act. The law was designed to prevent future coal mining from creating AMD problems as well and to set in motion the reclamation of old and abandoned mines. As an outgrowth, the Clean Streams Initiative began as a broad-based program to eliminate AMD.

The major culprit in acid mine drainage is abandoned deep or surface mines that discharge millions of tons of sulfuric acid into streams each year. The streams that typically drain these mines have their bottoms stained with a precipitate called "yellow boy." Yellow boy is an orange by-product of the reaction that takes place in the strip mine spoils or deep mine shafts.

Whenever iron sulfide (pyrite or "fool's gold") is leached by water, sulfuric acid is produced. The acid and iron are then transported from the mine site to streams by groundwater. The reduced iron is oxidized by the oxygen in the stream to form yellow boy.

Highly acidic waters do not support any appreciable amounts of aquatic life communities, except for a few very hardy species. Yellow Boy also coats stream bottoms and causes a smothering effect by filling in the small spaces between the rocks and gravel normally inhabited by fish food organisms.

AMD is the single greatest source of pollution in Pennsylvania's waterways; attempting to address all of the Commonwealth's problems would be an immense task. Rather than taking a statewide approach, Pennsylvania has embarked on a watershed strategy. The Little Toby Creek watershed in Elk County has been proposed as the state's priority watershed because of the potential to restore a trout fishery use.

Currently some $13 million in federal funding is being sought for the Clean Streams Initiative in the first year. This money would be distributed to all Appalachian coal states to fund work on individual priority projects.—Dan Tredinnick.

1995 Conservation Leadership School

The Penn State Conservation Leadership School is now accepting applications from students between the ages of 15 and 18 for its two-week residential programs. Sessions emphasize field-based, hands-on learning, group problem-solving, and environmental management. The curriculum involves active participation in environmental management, resource assessment, and regenerative conservation methods.

The school is held at the Stone Valley Recreation Area and uses the educational resources of Penn State. Students work in small groups under the guidance of a faculty member. The curriculum includes courses in watershed management, citizen action, basic ecology, land-use planning, alternative energy supplies, environmental risk assessment, and forest management. Living accommodations include four-person platform tents with cots, heated showers and restroom facilities, complete meal service and all educational needs. The 1995 sessions are: Session I, July 2 through July 15; session II, July 16 through July 29; and advanced session, August 3 through August 12.

For complete information or an application, contact: Jack Sinclair, 102 Wagner Building, University Park, PA 16802; 814-863-0229.
Commemorative Patch

This patch marks 125 years of the Commission's management of bass. The full-color patch is 3 1/4 inches across and 4 3/4 inches tall. The patch sells for $5 each postpaid including state sales tax. Send checks for money orders (please do not send cash) to: Publications Section, PA Fish and Boat Commission, P.O. Box 67000, Harrisburg, PA 17106-7000. Quantities are limited.

Angler's Notebook by Jeff Bryan

The best time to catch big catfish is at night. If you're fishing from the shore of a lake, pond or stream, cast your bait out and anchor your rod in the mud or prop it on a forked stick. Gently reel the slack out of the line so you have a "tight line" to your bait. If the night is clear, watch your rod tip for movement and then set the hook. If it is too dark to see your rod, tie a small bell to the tip-top and listen for the signal to set the hook.

Some of the year's best stream and river walleye fishing occurs during the spring spawning run. Concentrate your efforts on rapids, eddies and below dams. The deeper water adjacent to undercut banks is also a good bet in spring.

Fly-fishermen love to practice those long, rod-ripping, double-haul casts that can put a fly on the far side of a stream. However, if you want to become a better fisherman, it is much more important to practice making short, accurate casts. Take your rod for a walk around your yard, stopping often to make a cast at a flower, a rock, or the trunk of a tree. The more accurate you become, the better chance you have when faced with a difficult cast on a stream.

Catching largemouth bass on a fly rod is both fun and a fine challenge. When picking out a suitable rod, keep in mind you will be casting large, bulky flies to sometimes very big fish. A good all-round choice is a 9-foot rod, rated for an 8-weight line. This rod gives you the power you need to cast big flies and land big fish.

One of the most famous and effective bass lures is the plastic worm. When fishing a worm, cast it out and let it sink to the bottom. Begin your retrieve by moving it along the bottom, "feeling" the different humps, rocks, logs and other pieces of structure. A slow retrieve in this manner is often irresistible to bass, so be ready for the telltale "bump" a bass makes when it picks the worm off the bottom.

When faced with every trout fisherman's dream, a pod of rising fish, don't make the mistake of "flock shooting," or casting randomly in the middle of them, hoping for a take. Pick the nearest trout to you and cast to that fish first. If you cast to a fish farther out, you run the risk of spooking fish and putting them all down. Work the closest fish until you catch it, or it stops rising. Then move to the next fish in the group.
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