

SEASONAL SPECIFIC



SMALLMOUTH JOURNAL:

Real Winter River Smallmouth

Across the southern-most range for smallmouth bass one hears chatter about "winter smallie fishing." However, upon examination of water temperatures on the lakes and big rivers down south, those readings rarely fall below the mid-40 degree range.

"I don't know how to break it to them, but to a northern smallmouth bass angler, 45 degrees isn't winter water temp - we simply consider that temperature to be late fall fishing," says Pete Cartwright, river fishing expert and guide from White Oak, Pennsylvania. "To me, winter fishing is defined as water temperatures consistently below 40 degrees and falling towards ice-up. That's when our smallie bite really slows down and

catching them takes lots of patience."

"As long as water temperatures are in the mid-40s, I can catch smallmouth on jerkbaits and other slowly retrieved soft plastics. But once the water hits 40 degrees, the best presentation - the only effective presentation in my opinion - is dead-sticking. Now that's true winter fishing!"

Cartwright has been fishing rivers for smallmouth bass for over 32 years. His website www.SmalliesontheYough.com hosts information on smallmouth bass fishing. The Youghiogheny River - a shallow, rock-studded tributary to the Ohio River in southeastern Pennsylvania - is his home water. But he does not limit his fishing to just one river. You might find him on any

Pennsylvania flowing water, including the Allegheny River, French Creek, Juniata River, Susquehanna River and other smaller streams.

Every smallmouth bass addict I know undertakes their winter river fishing from a jet boat, but Cartwright is a confirmed wader.

Cartwright isn't much for hauling a boat around any time of the year, but especially in the winter when roads can be slippery and quiet water access ramps can skim over with ice cover. Besides, several of the waters he fishes in the winter are too small for boats. "But more importantly, when wading you are forced to cover a limited section of water much more thoroughly than when fishing from a boat," he explains.

Cartwright offers seven tips for true winter smallmouth fishing.

- 1. Proper dress is critical.** "If you overdress, you'll get sweaty and be chilled. If you under-dressed, you will be cold from the start. You've got to get just right with layering. I wear Cabela's neoprene waders over fleece pants and heavy wading socks. I can stand in the water all day without getting cold. On top I wear an Under Armour Long Sleeve T with Under Armour Mock Turtleneck Cold Gear over that. My final layer is windproof jacket. Of course Fingerless gloves are essential."
- 2. Smallmouth location.** "During the winter, I fish the smaller, fairly shallow rivers. In these waters in the cold water period, smallmouth bass may be almost anywhere - except in the fast water. Bass can be shallow or deep, over rocky bottom or soft bottom. The key is very slow moving water. For example in the Youghiogheny, I find a lot of fish in 10 foot holes. But on the Juniata River, I'm catching them in waist deep water. It depends on the characteristics of the particular river, with the only guarantee being the water must be slow," stresses Cartwright. He describes one of the most consistent spots being a shoreline eddy where a protruding point of land creates a nearly slack water backwash eddy below it. Feeding smallies typically sit in the quiet part of the current seam right at the top of the eddy.
- 3. Quality tackle required.** Cartwright says winter cold really tests your equipment, so choose wisely. When wading anytime of the year, you are limited to a single rod, unlike boat fishermen who may carry a half dozen. "I want a quality rod that is sensitive, with light tip but powerful backbone and capable of throwing the 1/16 to 1/4 ounce baits I use most frequently. My choice for years has been the G. Loomis Bronzeback 7'4" medium power model. I pair this with a Shimano 2500 Stradic spinning reel spooled with 8 pound fluorocarbon line. I do not drop below 8 pound test, because my line takes a beating over rock and obstacles encountered with my bottom presentation of jigs. I spray Reel Magic over my reel and line to help it function in freezing temps.
- 4. Only one lure needed.** "When water temperature drops below 40 degrees, I use one lure nearly all the time: a 3.5 inch tube with a 1/8-ounce insert head. Furthermore, I limit color selection to two choices: green pumpkin with black fleck or watermelon with red fleck. Can't get much simpler than that. The tubes I prefer are from a local hand-pour company called 412 Bait (www.412baitco.com). Their tubes are called 412ubes. The plastic formula

By Darl Black

used in these tubes is incredibly durable yet at the same time super soft - better than any tubes I have used from a large commercial operation. If the water level in a river is particularly low with current lighter than normal, I will drop to a 1/16 ounce head so the tube slides over the bottom with fewer hang-ups. Occasionally for a change of pace, I will switch to a hand-tied hair jig - but the tube is the real star."

- 5. Lure Prep.** "I soak my 412ubes in a mixture of crawfish scents including Gulp! Bang and Bio Edge. I will begin the long term soaking process in late summer so they are ready come December."
- 6. Presentation.** "Basically, how I fish tubes during winter cold water is best described as dead-sticking. I cast the tube to a target area, allow it glide to the bottom and then let it rest," explains Cartwright. Depending on the amount of current, the tube might tumble along the bottom for a short distance, or the tube may simply sit on the bottom with tentacles waving gingerly. Cartwright does not hop it or jig it or swim it. "It just sits oozing crayfish scent until a smallmouth slowly moseys up to it and sucks it in. Sometimes the pick-ups are incredibly soft, but other times smallies slam it." After 15 or 20 seconds of dead-



PETE CARTWRIGHT WITH HEFTY WINTER SMALLMOUTH BASS

sticking, he reels the bait in and makes another targeted cast.

- 7. It's all about crayfish.** Cartwright explains that wading in clear-water shallow rivers during the winter allows him to observe smallmouth and their prey at close range. "Smallmouths hug the bottom and move very little in cold water. Crayfish, if out, are even slower - almost like they are dead. I've touched crayfish and they don't even move." He goes on to explain that during the cold water period, northern river smallmouth root around rocks and into crevices in search of crayfish. You can tell this by the open sores on the foreheads of smallies. "Everything I do in terms of lure choice, scent soaking and the dead-stick presentation is designed to offer my tube as a winter crayfish meal to a bass."

Even if you do not plan to wade fish, the tips offered by Cartwright will help boat anglers score smallies on a river during the true ice water period of a northern winter. Go fish!

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