

FISHING FEVER ebook



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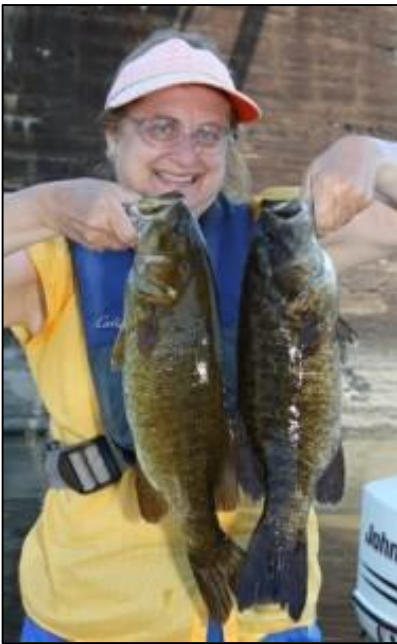


Smallmouth Bass Fishing: Which Lure When and Where?



By Darl Black

"You get a line and I'll get a pole, we'll go fishin' in the crawdad hole, honey, baby mine."



These smallmouths were stuffed with crawdads.

Every time I hear that line from the Crawdad Song, my mind immediately visualizes my favorite summer pas-time.

Although smallmouth bass never comes up in the song, just the mere mention of an olive-colored crustacean stimulates an auto response in this Yankee that goes like this: Crayfish + Rod + Summer = River Smallmouth Bass Fishing.

Ironically, river smallmouths rarely inhabit the type of muddy creek hole described in the song. Instead, bronzebacks in the summer are found primarily in relatively shallow, relatively strong current sections of a river or large creek. The bottom substrate will be comprised of rock, gravel and sand rather than mud. It's also the same environment that northern crayfish species inhabit.

While crayfish certainly comprise a portion of a river smallmouth's diet, there are additional prey species which must also be considered. Without question, insect larvae of stoneflies and mayflies as well as winged adults are consumed by smallies. One particular bottom critter which smallmouths love to gulp down is the hellgrammite, the 3" to 4" leathery larvae of a dobsonfly.

In any river or major creek, there are a wide assortment of minnows, dace, darters, shiners, chubs and madtoms (stone cats) that are critically important. Depending on the bait species, they may be found along the shallow rocky bottom, suspended in current seams or milling around eddies just off the faster moving water. With the exception of shiner species, most river preyfish species are darker in color than the typical silver patterns most fishermen imagine for baitfish.

Throw in frogs or even the occasional small mammal that falls into the river and you have a good insight into a river smallmouth's diet during the summer. As you can see, it is rather extensive – far beyond simple crayfish.

Now, don't fret. To consistently catch summertime smallmouth's does not require a specific, detailed lure to imitate each different prey. Unlike our fly-fishing friends who believe they must have precise bug representations of 50 or more insect species in order to catch trout, flowing-water smallmouths are not so discriminating.



These three anglers cast crankbaits to the flooded shoreline during a high water period during the summer.

Bronzebacks see food, and if hungry, they eat it. Sure, a lure must give the illusion of familiar prey in terms of size, action and perhaps color – but it does not need to be an exact replica. Heck, there are times when non-feeding smallmouth strikes the odd lure simply because they find it irritating.

How many readers remember the “Name That Tune” game show on television? Well, in my version of that game, I’ll state that: “I can catch summertime riverine smallmouth with only six lures.”

Here are My Choices ~ Plus, Where and When to Fish Them



The author has sufficient confidence in these six lures to catch creek & river smallmouth all summer long.

Tube Jig – The ultimate universal river bait is a 3" to 4" tube lure on an insert head. A dark colored tube with its multiple-strand tentacle tail represents a wide variety of bottom-dwelling creepy-crawlers and baitfish. Keep in mind there are more dark-colored preyfish in a river smallmouth's world than shad-colored bait.

Whereas an external jighead is likely to lodge in a rocky crevice on every other cast, by inserting a teardrop jighead into the body cavity, the thick, soft plastic head of the tube greatly reduces hang-ups. Select a jig weight (1/16, 1/8, 3/16 or 1/4 oz) that allows the bait to trickle along the bottom rather than becoming anchored.

Hop and drag a tube on hard substrate, swim it slowly like a minnow, or in certain instances streak a tube just under the surface – it is truly the most versatile lure in your river arsenal that can be fished in current seams, pocket eddies, tail-outs of pools, riffles and dredge holes.

In a river or creek, I fish tubes on 6 or 8lb test Gamma Edge fluorocarbon line and 6.5' to 7' fast action spinning rod.

Stick worm – Touring bass pros sometimes refer to this bait as a heavy worm or sinking worm – but to me, this blunt-end worm is more appropriately named a stick worm. For river fishing, I use a weightless stick worm as drift-bait, relying on the lure's own slow-sink design to meander to the bottom in the downstream flow.

In strong current situations, smallmouth typically set up an ambush point in a slackwater pocket waiting for a dislodged crayfish, hellgrammite or disoriented minnow to drift by. It's the best way to secure a meal while conserving energy. I rig a 4" Dinger (my favorite of the many stick worms on the market) Texposed on a 2/0 Mustad Mega Lite Hook.

I fish a stick worm on a spinning outfit spooled with 10lb Power Pro Braid and a 3' leader of 8 or 10lb fluorocarbon. The braid helps to float the worm while also acting as a visible bite indicator, even when slack forms during the drift – i.e. a bobber built into the line!

Soft Jerkbait – These slow-sink 4" to 6" soft plastic lures feature a representative baitfish profile. This bait delivers the best return on rivers when fished in areas with current.

Soft jerks can be fished both aggressively and passively on the same retrieve. Following a cast, apply a series of sharp rod snaps to make the bait dart just under the surface. This gets the attention of nearby smallmouth. Then incorporate a long pause in the retrieve as the bait drifts freely, acting like an injured baitfish.

Using a rod and reel with braid helps insure long casts and positive hook-ups. In stained water, I typically go with 15lb braid on a baitcasting outfit and tie direct to 5" soft jerk rigged Texposed on a 3/0 Mustad Mega Lite Hook.

But for low, clear water more typical of summer fishing, I use spinning gear with 10lb braid and a 3' fluorocarbon leader. In this instance, I tie on a #1 VMC drop-shot hook and nose hook a 3" to 5" soft jerkbait.



Darl Black happily lifts a smallmouth taken on a stick worm.

Hard Minnow Bait – I would feel incomplete in my flowing-water tackle selection if I did not have Original Floating Rapala. I caught my first river smallmouth on this bait as a youngster, and I’ve continued to count on it over the next five decades. In particular, it is my go-to choice for the smaller waters – a smallmouth “creek” versus a “river”.

I can twitch the Rapala to make it dance on the surface in place of a topwater bait along a quiet water bank; fish it more aggressively with long pulls and pauses in faster moving riffle water; or use a steady retrieve. Forget all the fancy new colors – just use the original silver or gold pattern. A moderate action spinning rod with 6lb co-polymer line (rather than fluorocarbon) is the proper outfit for this bait.

Buzzbait – I’m willing to bet that few river anglers fish a buzzbait in the manner that I learned from Kevin Turner, famed Upper Mississippi River smallmouth angler and owner of River Pro jet boats. After one trip with Kevin, I became a believer.

Select a 3/8 or 1/2oz buzzbait, such as Booyah Buzz with the extra ‘clacker’ blade. Strip off the silicone skirt and substitute a 3" or 4" soft jerkbait or simply a piece of plastic worm. (Substituting soft plastic body for the skirt increases casting distance considerably.) Tie direct to 30lb Power Pro Braid on an outfit with a high-speed casting reel.



Marilyn Black lands a smallmouth from near a bridge while wading.

Select a river section featuring extremely fast flow with lots of current breaks (created by rocks, sunken logs, etc.) for smallmouth to hold. Make long casts to the shore and return bait with a steady retrieve at 90 degrees to water flow. Oh yes – hold on tight! Executed properly in fast flows and you’re catch rate for smallmouth will climb dramatically.

Crankbait – When the level rises and a normally clear-water river becomes dirty from heavy summer rains, established patterns will change. Most of the above baits become less effective. Fortunately, feeding bass tend to move shallow with the rising water and spread out more along somewhat slack water areas. It's cranking time!

In the dingy water, the vibration and bolder colors of a crankbait will draw vicious strikes from bronzebacks that normally would find such a presentation unappealing. You should be targeting shorelines with slower moving water but with some type of cover – large rocks, logs, grass beds or eddies formed by inflowing tributary water.



Crankbait Success!

In most instances I'll select a crankbait which dives to no more than 4', preferably with a square lip to deflect off submerged cover. However, if confronted with a particularly steep bank where water depth may be 6' to 10', a crank that dives into the 6' plus depth is desired. Fish it on 10lb test co-polymer or fluorocarbon line.

I typically go with a crayfish pattern – something dark brown, black, red or with strong chartreuse in it. Bomber Model A, Cordell Big O, or Bandit Series are among my picks. Cast and retrieve, and keep moving to find the scattered bass.

How To Make Crappie Inhale Your Lure



By Darl Black



What do papermouth, speckled perch, calico and strawberry bass have in common? All are nicknames for crappie.

There are two species of crappie; the "black", sporting irregular dark spots on its sides and the "white", with faint dark vertical bars. Although

some minor differences exist between the two, the same fishing tactics and lures work for both.

Crappie are found in all contiguous 48 states, with respectable populations of the fish in every region of the country. What angler does not fish for crappie at least several times each spring?

I admit to being a smallmouth bass addict, but crappie fishing holds the number two spot on my list. However, for a great many anglers, crappie are #1. My wife, Marilyn, is one of them.



With the demands of her current job, Marilyn does not have a lot of time to fish. So when she has the opportunity to get on the water, she doesn't want to spend too much time chasing species that are reluctant to bite - for whatever reason. While she certainly desires a challenge when fishing, she also expects to be rewarded with a substantive catch. (You would never get her to go musky fishing, where deeply troubled individuals spend all day casting, with their only expected reward being a glimpse of a 'lunge *following* their lure!)

Crappie fill that “*challenging yet enjoyable with a tangible*”

reward” opportunity. In lakes with a self-sustaining population of crappie, these fish are abundant and always willing to bite (more so than smallmouth bass on many days). Furthermore, it takes skill to locate and catch crappie. Granted, speckled perch don't match the aerial acrobatics and lightning fast runs of some gamefish, yet a one-pound calico will give a good accounting of itself on light tackle. Hooking a true two-pounder can give you a thrill not soon forgotten.

You may choose to release your crappie as you catch them, or you may opt to keep some



for a meal. Try my low-fat oven-fried Cajun crappie recipe at the end of this article, and you'll be keeping crappie on every fishing trip!

One Rod vs Many

The approach to crappie fishing varies considerably depending on the region of the country. In many southern states, fishing regulations allow the use of multiple poles for crappie – as many as 16 rods in one state! In the South, anglers use slow trolling techniques with several 10 to 16 foot rods hanging over the gunwales. In some areas the strategy is referred to as spider rigging because a boat with so many rods and lines over the sides takes on the appearance of a spider.

Slow trolling isn't the approach that Marilyn and I take....we cast.

Someone might argue that our choice is based on the fact that we grew up fishing in states where the number of rods is restricted to one or two. But the truth of the matter is we find casting and manipulating a lure during the retrieve, plus feeling the bite while holding the rod, far more enjoyable than watching half a dozen rods sitting in pole



holders.

However, being a “single pole” angler does not mean owning one crappie rod. Various rods are needed for specific purposes. My arsenal consists of 5 rods: a 6'6" light power for 1/32 to 1/16-ounce lures in the shallowest water; a 6'6" medium light for 1/16 to 1/8-ounce lures for all around use; a 7' medium power for 1/8 to 5/16-ounce lures worked in deeper water; a 9' dippin' rod; and a 5' moderate parabolic rod for dock shootin'.

Springing Into Action

In Pennsylvania and other northern tier states, springtime crappie fishing begins as a lake's ice cover melts. The earliest biting fish are ones that have migrated to cover-laden shallow water, likely moving in prior to ice-out. Types of areas that crappie congregate this time of year include: backwater sloughs; shallow cuts with submerged wood; wind-protected bays with remnant beds of last season's spatterdock beds; and dead-slack pools at the mouths of tributary creeks. **Minnows have entered the shallows and crappie are here to feed, not to spawn.**

Ice-out crappie are not in a chasing mood. A struggling baitfish that seems unable to move off is the favorite target of calicos at this time. That's why a fathead minnow or emerald shiner suspended below a shallow-set bobber is so effective.



If you are not into still-fishing with live bait, try casting a small egg-shape float positioned 12 to 18 inches above a minimal action minnow-like jig. A 1/32-ounce hair jig or split-tail grub is a good choice. Cast beyond shallow cover and retrieve very, very slowly with long pauses.

There is a reason crappies have the nickname “papermouth”. Jerk too forcefully when a crappie takes the jig or bait, and you will tear the hook from the delicate mouth tissue. Instead, employ firm-but-gentle sweep when setting the hook.

Within weeks after ice-out, crappie abandon the extremely shallow backwaters. These fish re-locate not far from future spawning sites, and are joined by additional crappie



that did not move up for the early shallow-water feeding spree. Check out stumps, brush piles and hard bottom marl or gravel sites near mouths of bays in water depths from 5 to 14 feet, or run secondary points from shallow to deep to find staging fish.

During pre-spawn, crappie are usually aggressive, falling victim to an

array of action-tail jigs and swimming lures in the two to three-inch range. Typically these jig lures weigh-in around 1/16-ounce, although a slightly heavier head may be needed to maintain contact with the jig under breezy conditions or in deeper water.



Tubes and small curly-tail jigs have been the standard among crappie anglers for decades. But changing to a jig with a slightly different look or action may be the trigger for the day – especially for bigger fish. In addition to the usual suspects, I also carry 1-1/2 inch Slider Crappie Grubs, 2-inch Lake Fork Live Action Baby

Shad, 2-inch Skippy Fish, 3-inch Bobby Garland Slab Slay'R bodies and 1/16-ounce Road Runner jig-spinners.

Precise depth control of your bait is critical to catching strawberry bass. Once schooled crappie have been located on a key staging structure, the jig must be kept close to the bottom or within inches of the tops of submerged cover. Many days a steady do-nothing retrieve works best, but on other days you may need to tweak it with pauses or little lifts and drops.

Late Spring Spawn

Spawning does not begin until the water temperature in the shallows stabilizes around 60 degrees or slightly warmer, typically mid May or early June in Pennsylvania. Unlike the soft, gooey black bot-



tom areas where crappie had their ice-out feast, saucer-like nests are built by fanning a thin layer of loose silt or loam away from a firm bottom.

The depth at which crappie spawn depends largely on the clarity of water. In my region of the country, the bedding depth is generally between three feet and ten feet. In clear water it may be possible to see beds, but on other dingy water lakes the beds will not be visible even though constructed in quite shallow water. In addition, crappie beds are usually camouflaged among vegetation, reeds, stumps or stick-ups.

Knowing exactly what type of cover to target is vital during the spawn because fan casting an area may not produce fish. When on beds or in the post-spawn funk, crappie revert to a non-chasing mode. **The bait must be close enough to be inhaled by the crappie without making the fish move.** When targeting locked-down spawning fish, I prefer to fish “quiver tail” soft plastic bodies such as a Bobby Garland Baby Shad or Yum Woolly Beavertail.



Here is where dippin’ shallow cover with a long rod comes into play:

- Simply lower the bait beside cover and hold it for a few seconds
- “Swim it” by moving the rod tip and pause again
- Raise or lower the jig, and repeat



If you don’t have a long dippin’ rod, a shorter rod with a bobber to suspend the jigging lure will accomplish the hovering presentation.

Late pre-spawn to post-spawn crappie may hang around docks. Reaching these fish requires skipping

or shooting a small jig far under the dock, thus the need to keep a short, parabolic action rod handy. A solid body 2” Yum Vibra King Tube holds up to repeated skipping, and it can be fished slowly or even dead-sticked in place if needed.

Color My World Natural

Southern crappie fishermen are into bright, bold colors in their crappie jigs. These fishermen often use tri-colored soft plastics in an attempt to find the right color to trigger strikes. Typically, bright hues are employed on the dirty water lakes being fished.



On the other hand, a good share of my crappie fishing is done on clear natural lakes or moderately clear reservoirs. I find success with more natural minnow, shiner and shad-colored baits. White, silver, watermelon and clear with sparkle are among my favorites. I'll go with a darker body and chartreuse tail when the water is cloudy or somewhat dingy – but rarely will you find a gaudy tri-colored jig body on the end of my line.

Now get out there and catch those spring crappie!

The Most Deadly Lure For Big Trout



By Darl Black



I was flush with excitement when invited to join a party of outdoor writers on a visit to [Arkansas' legendary White River](#) with lodging at the famed [Gaston's Resort](#) in the Ozark Mountains. Friends who had previously fished the river advised me to expect exceptional catches. But an

hour after departing the boat dock with a fishing buddy and guide in one of the classic White River drift boats, we had yet to connect with a trout.

“You should have been with us yesterday morning,” said [Northland Fishing Tackle](#) representative Eric Naig, who had arrived a couple days earlier than me. “It was a trout on every cast along this very bank. Not sure why they are not biting today.”

However, our guide wasn't ready to offer excuses. After glancing at his watch, he promised a turn around within 15 minutes.



On our White River fishing trip, Eric scored a number of rainbow trout and our first brown trout with his “Pink” marabou jig. However, the larger browns came on suspending jerk-baits.

12" Trout Began Gobbling our Bait...

By the time we motored to our next spot and positioned the boat for a drift, the trout population had apparently undergone a change of attitude. As if an "on" switch had been thrown, 9" to 12" rainbow trout began gobbling our live bait offerings. Apparently at this time of year, rising river levels resulting from timed releases at Bull Shoals Dam are critical to turning on the trout. The gate opening schedules are monitored closely by river guides who have realized it's like ringing the dinner bell.

Catching trout on worms isn't rocket science. All species of trout relish small red wigglers. It's simply a matter of tying on a #8 lightwire hook and adding the right amount of weight so the worm bounces along the bottom. Typically in small streams with light to moderate current, one or two split-shot are crimped on the line about 18" above the bait. However, in heavier current situations, such as on the White River, a different rigging is utilized with 1/8 or 3/16-ounce bell-style or pencil sinker on a separate leader attached to a three-way swivel.

The idea of using live bait for trout would not sit well with many upper-crust fly-fishermen I know. And they would grimace at the idea of keeping a few trout. However, on the White, legal-size rainbow trout are stocked in large numbers by the state fisheries department in order to satisfy fishermen who routinely come to the river for a take-home trout dinner. Fishermen are literally expected to keep trout.



Brown trout are exceptionally beautiful trout.

Eric and I had been tasked with providing fish for a creek side trout bake scheduled later in the day at [Gaston's](#) outdoor pavilion for all the writers in our group. It didn't take long to secure sufficient number of eating-size rainbows for the feast.

trout of at least 24" may be harvested. Although we had no intention of keeping any

A More Challenging Quarry - The White River's Prized Brown Trout

Then our attention turned to a more challenging quarry – the White River's prized brown trout. Liberal harvest regulations apply to rainbow trout; however only 1 brown



The Rapala X-Rap jerkbait performed well on the White River, accounting for numerous brown trout.

trout of at least 24" may be harvested. Although we had no intention of keeping any browns, I was salivating at the thought of catching a few of these beautifully marked fish for photographs. Furthermore, stream-seasoned big browns certainly put up a better fight than stocked rainbows.

The manager of Gaston's tackle shop had recommended marabou-body jigs for big browns. Fortunately, Eric had a supply of Northland's new 1/16- and 1/8-ounce Bug-A-Boo Jigs.

The manager of Gaston's tackle shop had recommended marabou-body jigs for big browns.

Fly-fishermen offer hand-tied insect-imitating creations to trout while preaching the discipline of specific hatches. But the truth is this: big browns are basically meat eaters year round. Sure, they may slurp bugs now and then as an appetizer, but for the main course they want crawfish or large creek minnows. Marabou jigs are a good representation for both types of forage.

In an attempt to figure out the most productive color pattern for the day, Eric and I each fished a different color jig. We quickly discovered that rainbows found Eric's "pinkie" marabou to be a more interesting meal than my black marabou. The pink marabou also scored our first moderate-size brown trout. But we still lacked a hefty brown of at least 20 inches that would allow us to say to friends *"This is a White River trout!"*

The Most Deadly Lure for Browns

So I reached into my tackle bag of tricks to come up with what I consider the most deadly universally effective lure for browns – a long-minnow stickbait.

In my experience, big browns are in many ways similar to river smallmouth bass. Present what appears to be a big injured minnow close to their hide, and they cannot refuse it. Nothing says ‘injured baitfish’ better than the rhythmic pull-pause of a suspending jerkbait. I figure if it works on the streams of Pennsylvania, it will work on the streams of Arkansas.

I started with a 3-1/8” #8 Rapala X-Rap in Hot Pink – the jig color which was working so well for Eric. Following an initial long first cast, I turned the reel handle several times to drive the jerkbait to its suspending depth. Then I paused for several seconds to let the bait hover while I rubbed a little feeling back into my chilled fingers. Suddenly, I felt the unmistakable jolt through the line of a fish inhaling the lure.



Eric battles a brown trout from a traditional hite River drift boat controlled by a guide.

Caught more or less napping at the stick, I failed to deliver an appropriate hookset. The energetic fish decided grabbing air was the best way to throw the object-that-wasn't-prey from its mouth. However by throwing the lure in such a spectacular way, it clearly showed itself to be a nice brownie.



Larger size jerkbaits often draw strikes from larger brown trout.

A few casts later – another hit. This time I was properly in tune to perform a side-sweep hookset. The second brown's spectacular air show did not result in an escape this time.

The brown trout is one of the most beautiful members of the trout family. Brownish in overall tone, the dark brown or gray-brown color on the back and upper sides fades into a rich creamy yellow on the lower sides. Large dark spots are outlined with pale halos on the sides, the back and the dorsal fin, with reddish-orange or yellow spots scattered on the sides. Browns are truly a magnificent fish.

The Hot Pink X-Rap produced several more trout before Eric also switched to a jerk-bait. When he started catching them on a different color and different model, it became evident that color wasn't the trigger as much as the jerk-pause of the stickbait. Later in the day I switched to a 5-1/2" Xcalibur Jerkbait and continued to catch brown trout.

The trout fishing remained exceptional during the remaining days of this wintertime fishing trip, although it did require a rise in the flow to trigger the strongest bite. Live bait and small jigs certainly produced the greatest number of small trout. But each day it took a jerk to haul in trophy-size browns.

Which Jerkbait for Trout?

On a *river* (as opposed to a smaller *stream*), a 3" to 4-1/2" jerkbait is a good choice. The bait will hang in the water around the 3' to 4' depth making an easy target for a fat lazy brown trout. My favorites include a Rapala X-Rap Slashbait; XCalibur Xt3 Twitch Bait; Sebile A-Cast Minnow; or Lucky Craft Pointer 78. For typically clear water, my color picks are natural baitfish patterns and fingerling trout patterns.

However, should the water be dingy due to runoff or a dam release, you may want to jump up to slightly larger profile bait, and select a pattern with some chartreuse or hint of a bolder color in it. I recall one day on the west branch of the [Delaware River](#) with stained water, when an XCalibur Xs4 (4-1/2") jerkbait in Sour Grape caught trout after trout, when nothing else produced. Few trout anglers would consider that large of a stickbait in such a wild color.

If you're fishing a *stream* composed mainly of shallow water runs and holes that rarely exceed three or four feet, go with a 2" to 3" jerkbait to match the size of smaller baitfish. Sometimes, a floating stickbait would be a better choice to reduce the chances of snagging the bottom. Among the smaller baits to consider are Yo-Zuri Pins Minnow Magnet; Rapala Flat Rap; and Lucky Craft Humpback Pointer.



Brown trout are outstanding fighters and deserve the right to be released.

Bass-Style Spinnerbaits for Walleyes? The Surprising Truth!



By Bernie Barringer

At times in my fishing career, I've just shaken my head in wonder. Those occasions have turned into "aha" moments. This happened to me about ten years ago on sprawling Lake McConaughy in western Nebraska.

I was fishing the big walleyes for which the lake is famous, and happened to drop in at a tournament weigh-in. It was a Nebraska Walleye Association event, and as the leaders paraded through the weigh-in with their 30- and 40-pound bags of fish, I heard several of the top teams say they caught their limits on spinnerbaits.

I was certain it was a local way of referring to bottom bouncers and spinners, or some kind of crawler rig, but a little investigative work proved me wrong. These anglers were using bass fishing baits and collecting limits of large walleyes on them.

Large numbers of anglers were slow-rolling 3/4-ounce spinnerbaits along the rocks of the dam and rock bluffs of the lake. They were counting them down to 18-25 feet where the schools of baitfish were located. Some of them were casting spinnerbaits among the boulders and fluttering the baits down into the shadows where the walleyes would attack. Some were even trolling them!



Bernie Barringer displays a large walleye caught on Devils Lake on a spinnerbait. The flooded timber at Devils Lake provides an ideal setting for walleyes with spinnerbaits.

I had caught a few walleyes on spinnerbaits in the wilds of Canada – but I figured that was a fluke! After all, those naive walleyes will eat most anything that doesn't eat them first. But could there be more to this spinnerbait thing for walleyes?

I'd later learn that fishing with spinnerbaits was once a big secret on western reservoirs, but it's a secret no longer. "Spinnerbait fishing for walleyes is very common on McConaughy," says tournament angler Travis Sanger, a spinnerbait convert. "It is also popular on Merritt Reservoir and Elwood, which is where I believe it all started."



Occasionally the addition of a trailer hook will increase the catch rate when walleyes are less than aggressive and sometimes just nip at the tail of the bait. The trailer hook with a Gulp! Minnow or PowerBait grub will give them something to aim for and increase the hookup percentages.

So what makes a spinnerbait the ticket on those three reservoirs? "Alewives," he says. "I have also seen them work well on lakes that have a shad forage base, which includes some of the Nebraska reservoirs, but alewives are a key." Turns out, a spinnerbait not only imitates an alewife, but it attracts them.

"When you see alewives following your spinnerbait, you know you're in the right area. I don't know if they follow out of curiosity or what, but they follow a spinnerbait. If alewives are around, walleyes will be nearby. If you aren't seeing alewives following your bait, do not spend too much time there."

But are spinnerbaits really the right tool for the job in this situation? Or would a more traditional walleye lure be better? “The advantage of a spinnerbait is its ability to select for larger fish,” Sanger explains. “You won’t have 40-50 fish days with a spinnerbait; but as a tournament bait, it is great because it is selecting those four- to five-pound fish and up.” That’s the upside to the bait, but there’s a downside too. “It tends to make you a hero or a zero,” he says.

That, of course, begs the question: Will spinnerbaits work in waters other than western reservoirs – waters with similar forage base and cover? I sought to answer that question while pre-fishing an FLW Walleye Tour event on Devils Lake, North Dakota a few years ago.

I was pitching shad raps among the flooded timber, a technique that has put a whole lot of Devils Lake walleyes through the weigh-in line over the years, when I noticed a pattern: I was catching more walleyes when patches of weeds were nearby. Shad Raps are often lost on the tangles of underwater wood, and they do not pull through weeds well at all.

I decided to pull out a spinnerbait, and to my excited amazement, I caught walleyes on four of my next five casts. “A spinnerbait stays in the strike zone longer than a crankbait,” says Devils Lake guide Jason Feldner. “You can crawl them over branches and fish them right along the edges of the deep weedline. I’ve caught a lot of fish on them.”

Feldner uses two distinct techniques. In the spring, he likes to use a detachable blade like a Beetle-Spin blade, with a 1/8- to 1/4-ounce jig and a plastic trailer such as a Power Bait twister-tail or shad body. He prefers yellow and white. “The walleyes hit them really aggressively,” he says. “Usually from behind – a lot of the time your line will just go completely



The author’s friend Duane Ryks dips a spinnerbait tipped with a Gulp! 3” minnow in a bucket of Gulp! Juice. This really charges up the bait.



Here's the author with a walleye caught on a spinnerbait. Walleyes attack spinnerbaits aggressively and often engulf the entire bait.

Feldner also slow-rolls them over deep structure, counting them down and retrieving them along the bottom, similar to the way the McConaughy anglers were fishing the dam.

Most spinnerbait walleye anglers agree on one thing: willow leaf blades. Maybe it's the combination of flash and vibration that attracts them. Or the tight spin of a willow leaf blade that creates just the right profile. "I don't know why it is, but willow leaf blades produce walleyes," says Travis Sanger. "If it is a willow leaf and gold in color, it's the right spinnerbait for walleyes."

Sanger likes to combine his gold willow leaf blades with spinnerbait bodies and skirts in chartreuse or white. Feldner basically agrees with the color choice, most often going with yellow or white. Both are fishing moderately clear water. For stained water, brighter colors like fluorescent orange or fire tiger might be a better choice.

Sanger asserts that the upsides of fishing spinnerbaits for walleyes far outweigh the downsides. And he is certain they will work in many other walleye waters, particularly those where shad or alewives are the primary forage.

"You can cover a lot of water with them and select for bigger fish," Sanger says. "It is hard to spend the time to really gain confidence in them, but once you do, it's golden!"

About the Authors

Bernie Barringer:



Bernie Barringer hunts a variety of species in several states and Canadian provinces. He has published more than 400 articles in two dozen outdoor magazines and authored ten books on hunting, fishing and trapping. He is the managing editor of [Bear Hunting Magazine](#), and blogs his hunts and fishing on his website www.bowhuntingroad.com.

Darl Black:

A former school teacher, Darl switched careers nearly 20 years ago to follow his passion. Today he is a free-lance outdoor writer & photographer specializing in freshwater angling. His articles and photos appear in numerous print publications and websites. Although he fishes for all species, without reservation Darl says smallmouth bass are his favorite. Darl lives in Northwest Pennsylvania with his wife Marilyn, also an avid angler. Their home is situated within an easy drive of several great smallmouth fisheries, including Lake Erie, Allegheny River and Conneaut Lake. Follow Darl's weekly fishing exploits on his blog as he visits places both near and far to try his hand at a variety of species. To learn more about freshwater angling tactics and destinations around the country from professional anglers and guides interviewed by Darl, check out his articles in many of the major outdoor/fishing publications.



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