

Tactics for Fox River Smallies

By Jason Napodano

Fish live in deep water and feed in the shallows, that's what I was told as a kid as a general rule to catching fish. While not entirely the case it was a good starting point. Having the right bait and working it properly are all secondary to finding the fish. Unless you know there's something there or you just feel like killing time in a peaceful outdoor setting, if you aren't getting any action in 20 minutes or so it's time to move. One of the biggest mistakes I observe fellow fisherman doing is they get on a spot they've caught fish at before and stay there for fishless hours' with a look of bewilderment as to why they're not catching anything this time out. So many factors come into play as far as locating fish and choosing the best presentation to get them on the end of your line. You need to consider time of year, time of day, sunlight or lack thereof, barometric pressure, water levels, water clarity, water temp.....you get the idea. I'll try and give you some of my insight from experiences I've had observing smallmouth patterns on the Fox River. The thing that separates those from the "once a month time killing trying to get out of the house for some peace n quiet" crowd is your ability to adapt on the water to the current conditions. Smallmouth bass relate to structure, depth and current flow, and can be found behind a riffle, in front of a riffle, or actually in a riffle. Same with fallen/shoreline trees, great smallie holding areas. Anything that breaks the currents' normal flow pattern will hold a fish by creating a spot the fish can "hang" in while waiting to ambush food. Some of the best spots to find big smallies are behind boulders submerged in the river, but little ones will hang out there too. Another area you'll find smallies is the confluence of two channels, usually one is faster moving than the other and they will sit on that edge waiting for prey to be washed by. High water they move tighter to shore, shallower water they go to deeper holes and below tailwater areas. Right before a low pressure system moves in is the ideal time to fish, however barometer readings in the 29.7 to 30.7 inch range will do the trick.

Starting with spring the fish become active on a consistent basis when the water temps reach 45-48 degrees. This usually occurs in March on the Fox. Water temp dictates fish

activity levels more than anything else in my opinion. Shallow prespawn area's, or places nearby, are the first place I target smallies. Over the winter I read that smallies will spawn in deeper water which is something I'm going to try myself this year. 60-63 degrees is supposedly when the bass move on their beds and begin to spawn, I've seen them start when it hits the upper 50's in the river. If you can't catch a smallie in the months of April or May you really should look into something else to waste your time. Catching smallies is so easy during this time, it should be, and is in some places, illegal. With aggressive smallies protecting their beds the fishing is fast and furious when they are in this phase. When post-spawn rolls around, the bite slows down considerably, and I usually look for shoreline structure or current seams near the spawning areas. Some think this can be one of the better times to catch a hawg looking to recuperate from the spawn, but that hasn't been the general rule in my experience. As June, July and August bring the heat of summer; time of day begins to play a bigger role and fish move into the main river. Midday during summer, deep water structure and shaded areas produce the bigger fish. Western shoreline in the evening and under bridges or other objects that obstruct sunlight for most of the day are the spots to hit. One particular spot that comes to mind as a favorite is a group of large boulders in 4 feet of water. My best results come an hour each way of sunset, when it's hot the fish hold off on aggressive feeding during the day and move into ideal shallower spots where they can encircle baitfish in the evening. Areas with deeper structure or shallower area's adjacent to deep water is where I focus on a midsummers' eve. I've literally watched smallies go back and forth from the deep water, fly into the shallows to eat something, then go back to the deep water and do it all over again only to see them take something off the top in the middle of the river a minute or two later. The thinking there is depth or something close to depth. September and early October I've found to be second only to the pre/spawn period as the best time of year to catch a trophy smallie. Fish seem to know colder weather is coming and get hungry. This is a time of year I haven't found a depth pattern but rather they seem to be around all areas with structure, deep and shallow.

Once you've found the fish bait selection is the next "key". Matching the hatch is probably the best way to approach selecting the right bait. Understanding the biological

aspect of how smallmouth find prey is probably the next most important aspect and has really enhanced my size/catch rate. Smallmouth bass are predatory sight-feeders, they like to lie in wait and ambush their prey. Think of it as underwater hide-n-seek with the loser getting eaten. Smallmouths primary way of finding food is by sight. They see it, they nail it. Over the past 5 years or so I've experimented with different ways to add "flash" to my baits or make them easier for fish to see and I have caught many larger fish by doing so. Early in the year, heglies and other baits that mimic larvae are a good choice. I've had the best luck with 2-3 inch pulse grubs. Either way put them on a roadrunner jig and you've got a smallie slaying machine. During the pre-spawn and spawn periods my go-to bait is a plastic lizard, a smallie sees one of those swimming around and destroy it, no flash needed :) The best one's I've found are floating lizards made by strike king or riverside. Another good bait during this phase is a topwater plug. In the evening, I use a storm crickethopper with the back treble removed and replaced with a fly on a 8 inch leader, more often times than not they end up on the fly. It all depends on what portion of the water column the fish are feeding at. This time of year smallies will hit pretty much anything that moves so a variety of baits will do well. As you move into the post-spawn and summer months I think bait selection plays a larger role in your fish catching rate. Post spawn I tend to throw large plastics like venoms' hollow hogs and other big baits trying to lure out lunkers from underneath logs and other shoreline structure (picnic tables). Crawdads tend to start showing up about this time if not a little earlier and are probably one of the most universal baits you can use from late April thru late Sept. Yum, riverside and a host of others are now making plastic craws that are exceptional for smallies. Rebel craws are the better known crawdad hard baits that work well. My best luck with them has come on current seams and riffles, areas where they are most likely to be at a vulnerable point naturally, in stronger current. I also have a bomber crankbait in craw color, and I've found it runs truer in the water than rebel craws. Crawdads would be my daytime lure and rapalas are my evening lure for hardbaits in the summer. Silver and gold are my colors of choice for rapalas, with gold holding the light better but both have worked very well. I have a good friend in Batavia that only throws rapalas year round, doesn't use anything else, and always catches fish. Mepps spinners are also very productive although more for mid-sized fish in my experiences.

Middle of the summer I use smaller hardbaits, come fall I upsize everything. All this aside, in the summer and fall my go-to favorite bait is a "bleeding" flash jig that I make and tie myself. Last year I got that huge 18+ out of the Apple on it and one or two 18+ from the Fox, can't really count the one I lost at my feet that night fishing with Bill Chase that was probably my biggest of the year. Tipped with an extra-large fathead in the summer and medium roach in the fall I destroy smallies day, evening and night with this set up. I first started using this combo about 4 years ago when I bought some "crappie" jigs at sports authority. That was before gander mountain and galyans were in the picture. The last two years I had a hard time keeping them stocked and bought out whatever the store had and it still wasn't enough so I decided to start making my own. I have a patent for design on the multi-colored (see bleeding) flash jigs with wide gap hooks (*insert pic). I wouldn't have started making these things if I didn't think they were the best choice available for the way I approach fishing. What makes them so effective goes back to the way smallies find prey, they are sight-feeders, and therefore the more flash the better, within reason of course. In my experience color doesn't come into play as much as it is hyped. The theory is in clear water natural colors are best and murky water brighter colors are best. The Fox can rarely be called a "clear" water river and usually has 6-18 inches of visibility. The tributaries are the most likely to have less stained water. That being said I've done well with pumpkinseed color plastics while the guy I'm fishing with is tossing bright orange or chartreuse and we both caught fish. In my opinion, this has more to do with confidence.

Presentation comes down to reading the fishes' activity level. Water temp can also be a big factor in deciding which presentation is best for that time. When it's cold the fish are less active so your approach should be slower and more subtle. When they're jumping all over and smacking the surface like it's their job you can't go wrong with any topwater or hardbait presentation. Also coming into play is your familiarity with the area you are fishing. Hardbaits are a great way to cover lots of ground quickly whereas the right plastic or a flash jig is ideal for working an area you know is holding fish, you can dance it slower and keep it in the same place longer.

Ask any experienced fisherman/woman and they'll tell you on any given day you can throw all this info out the window, and the smallies will defy the general rules of fishing as we know them. High sun, clear water and they're hitting hard, go figure. But hopefully some of this information will help you to get on some monster smallies this year and/or add some consistency to your fish catching abilities! Please practice C-P-R with all the smallies you catch, they'll be there next time and hopefully they'll gain a pound or two for your next 30 second photoshoot. Good luck and be safe!!! Jason

Jason Napadano can be found wade fishing many rivers in Illinois and Wisconsin, and frequently posts his reports on Chitown-Angler. He can be reached through the site by PM.

Word Count: 1964

IMAGES?

- 1 Image of dropper rig
- 2 Cricket & fly rig
- 3 Image of bleeding flash rig