

Smallmouth under Difficult Water Conditions

By
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The disappointed look on my client's faces said it all as I pulled into the launch ramp. The heavy rains from the night before had totally messed up the river, and their confidence level was starting out low before we even started. Trust me, we will catch smallies today I told them as I launched the boat.

Now don't get the wrong idea. I'm not saying I always catch hordes of smallmouth no matter how lousy the conditions. High water, strong currents, and dirty water can test any river angler. And rivers can certainly deal us the bad hands. I have fished a number of rivers that were in very bad moods and have developed some ways to deal with these difficult conditions.

One thing I have learned is that smallmouth bass are a lot like people, they like stability in the lives. The river smallies are able to adapt to a variety of conditions once things have stabilized. Fast rising river levels or quickly muddying water can initially turn the fish off. But once the adverse conditions have been around a few days the, smallmouth generally adjust and develop a feeding pattern. Secondly every river is different even sections of a river miles apart are different, so having an intimate knowledge of a particular section of river is especially valuable. Here's a short course on beating tough conditions, trial by trial.

Fast Moving Water:

The water hasn't really muddied up and the river stage shows it rose a few inches; it might appear much like it did before the rain. But upon closer inspection the water is really moving, so have the smallmouth. They have shifted their locations to avoid the strong current. Instead of cursing in head-of-pools or holding in open pools they will seek out more protected areas out of the strong currents.

During the first day or so the smallmouth will hunker down and dramatically reduce their activity level till they get used to the change. Fast water holding areas are shoreline line

cover; bank eddies, and large back eddies down-stream of big rocks or islands anything to break the current.

Your primary goal is to get the fly as close to the fish as possible and getting a fly down to bottom-hugging smallmouth is tough in heavy current. A fast-sinking wet tip or full-sinking line with a short leader is a good way to scrape bottom with a subsurface fly like a streamer or nymph. In strong current conditions I like to work the fly against the current. This way instead of letting your fly be swept away with the current downstream, you can hold the fly right in front of an inactive fish. With this in your face approach you want to make a cast a few above your target, allowing your fly to settle (while keeping a tight line) then you want to start moving your fly with small strips and pause. You want the fly to dart a few inches forward, then settle back while remaining in the same area near the bottom. If you don't get a hit 30 seconds let out a few feet of line so that the fly is pulled down stream. Repeat this procedure until you thoroughly cover the target zone.

High Water:

Just as with heavy current fishing, targeting proper locations is a key to high-water success. Smallmouth will move into areas that didn't have water before the rains. Flooded bank grasses, rock or wood structure areas that will break or slow the current down. A general rule of thumb is when the water raises the smallmouth move into the shore line and when the waters recede they move out. Baitfish will often move into these flooded areas to feed, with the smallmouth close behind. Another excellent area during high water is the mouths of tributaries. This area does two things, first you have to different flows coming together forming an eddy or pool of slack water, and second the incoming water from the tributary is bringing in nutrients that will attract various forage species.

The key to fishing high water is to quickly sort through vast majority of unproductive water, and find the productive water. Finding fish holding areas like eddies, flooded grasses, and current breaking structure isn't easy, you will have to cover a lot of water to find the areas that hold fish. Boat control is essential; you really need to slow your boat down so you can effectively work potential areas. Once you find an area with fish, it pays

to quietly anchor and work the area thoroughly. If you caught a few fish and things slow down its time to move on and start the searching for another holding area.

Dirty Water:

I am not talking about water that has a little color to it, I talking about the stuff that looks like coffee with cream and makes most anglers just pack up and head home. This can be very frustrating fishing, but smallmouth can be caught. The first day or two the smallmouth will be less active till they get adjusted to the change, then the feeding will increase.

The most effective dirty water strategy is to find the prime holding areas (the same type of areas you fished in high water) and thoroughly and slowly work these areas with high-visibility flies. Bright colors like chartreuse, orange, white and black, with lots of flash. Also a large profile streamer something that will push a lot of water in bright colors is very effective. By focusing on the best spots in the river, you will have time to really work the key areas. This is an ultra-slow, highly focused presentation.

Difficult water conditions can be very intimidating to a fly-fisherman, put its not an excuse to pack up and head home. By slowing your presentation down, covering the best water thoroughly and putting the fly in their face, you can catch smallmouth in adverse water conditions, maybe not the numbers under normal conditions. But by learning how to fish these adverse conditions will make you a better fisherman.