

This Month With A Susquehanna River Guide

By Lance Dunham

Since this is my first column here let me tell you just a few things about myself first. My name is Lance Dunham, I'm a full time, seven days a week, registered fishing guide on the North Branch of the Susquehanna River. I've been lucky enough to have this job, if you can call it that, for the last 27 years. I've pretty much seen it all and have done it all in that time including meeting most of the river rocks in a very abrupt way .

This month has been one of very low water and warm temperatures. More rocks are showing each day with the water temperature in the 75 to 83 degree range. I use what is called a jet boat. The motor doesn't have a propeller but instead sucks up water from the bottom and pushes the water out the back giving me the ability to run in four inches of water, but the boat needs to be going fast to do so. In my boat I need to be going around 35 to 40mph to get through the shallow water or it's crash time. I've learned where the rocks are over the years and I usually know what rocks are coming up before I get to them. This gives the impression to the average person on shore that I may be out of my mind for going that fast around the rocks in the shallow water. That just may be, but it's really the safest way for me and my passengers to get through. I can't slow down or stop for in doing so may put a rock up through the hull of the boat.

Let's talk a little bit about fishing the river. There are three basic rules to remember in finding and catching smallmouth bass on the river that I use.

Number one is location. The fish in the river are always on the move to different locations during the year that makes them the most comfortable to live in. In low, warm water conditions, the easiest place to find the smallmouth bass is in or near the faster water. They find more oxygen in those areas . The warmer the water, the more concentrated the fish, and the larger fish will be in the deeper areas close to the fast water.

Number two is weather. The fish will hold to cover more if the sky is sunny. Overcast days or days with darker skies are the easiest days to find fish. The fish are out and away from structure looking for food in a more aggressive manor this is why you can commonly catch more fish early in the day and later towards dusk.

Number three is water clarity. Fish no matter what their size need to feel safe from their predators, whether they are bigger fish , bird, or mammal. If the sky is bright and the water clear, go deeper for the bigger fish. If the water is dark stained or muddy, the fish could be right on the shore line.

This month the lures that are working well are bottom bouncing jigs, small spinners, jerk baits, and crank baits.

One of the best lures to use in the river is the tube jig. I rig these up using a one eighth ounce internal lead head jig. With this lure you want to imitate a crawfish which is one of the main food sources of the smallmouth bass. Cast the lure slightly up river and slowly jig the tube down by twitching your wrist while you reel up the slack line. If you feel anything, set the hook and reel. We can get into the use of the rest of these lures in more detail in future columns. Just apply them to the three basic rules above.

Because of the low water now, the birds that eat the fish are out in abundance. I see on an average day about twenty great blue herons, six to eight king fishers, at least fifty merganser ducks, a couple of small green herons and of course two or three bald eagles. Right now the young eagles are gathering up in just a couple of sections on the river. I'm seeing four or five juvenal eagles at one time. All of these birds live off the fish in the river. The other day I saw a new temporary addition to the fish eating birds and that was three snowy egrets. These big birds look similar to the great blue heron only they are pure white, a truly beautiful bird.

Being a fishing guide all these years I meet some truly great people from all walks of life. Some have very good angling skills, some have never touched a fishing rod before, some are serious, and some are just down right funny. Once in awhile, I have someone on board that wants to show off their fishing knowledge to me whether they have any or not. Not knowing my first time clients, I have to assume they know nothing and suggest everything until I learn what fishing expertise they have. This is always done with a smile and a calm voice. I had a fellow that caught a small 13" walleye and I mentioned to him not to put his thumb in his mouth because they have very sharp teeth. He told me in his most manly voice that he catches walleye all the time in Canada and that the teeth in this small walleye aren't long enough to do him any harm. Well he proceeds to put his thumb in the fish's mouth to get the hook out and unlike a bass, it chomps down on the guys thumb. The macho guy gives a little grunt, the little fish starts flopping and the blood starts to trickle down. Now in a hurry, he yanks the walleye off and throws the little fish in the water. I ask him if he'd like some first aid for that thumb because it's bleeding now. No, of course not, that would be like admitting it might have hurt or something. I smiled and told him that it isn't the length of the teeth that gets you, but those little needle sharp teeth will break off in your thumb and give you a serious infection. Sure enough, by the end of the day his thumb was red and swollen with a couple of those little needle teeth firmly imbedded, I suggested that he get to a doctor very soon.

In an effort to understand the fragile balance of nature, one of my hobbies is ageing fish. With the help of a good microscope and a couple of fish scales, I can tell you within two years, just how old that fish is. I've aged hundreds of fish to get a good average. For instance, a 15" to 16" smallmouth bass here on the North

Branch averages eight years old! Most people I talk to never knew this, they think that it only takes a few years to get a big smallie as we call them. On my boat we practice “Selective Harvest”. We don’t harvest any smallmouth bass unless my customer wants to take one as a trophy for the wall, and this has only happened a couple of times that I can recall. The new fiberglass reproductions are so realistic there is no need to kill the big breeders anymore. If I want to put my clients on smallmouth bass day after day, I certainly don’t want to kill them all off. We boat between 7,000 to 10,000 fish per season and just my boat could put a serious hurt on a section of the river if we kept all the legal size fish allowed.

Now I’m not saying for everyone to stop eating the smallmouth bass here in the river. I know that the river only has so much food base per mile that can only support a certain amount of predator fish in that mile. What I do suggest is that we only harvest what we want to eat that day and don’t misuse the resource . If you feel that you must take smallmouths home, only take the 12” to 14” for food and leave the old 15” and bigger fish to breed and fight again another day for the future of our sport. To kill an eight year old fish to fill our stomachs for eight minutes, just doesn’t seem right to me.

Well that’s my report for the North Branch of the Susquehanna River for this month. Boat safely and see you on the river.

Good Fishing

Lance

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