

This Month with a Susquehanna River Guide

Lance Dunham

This month started out being more like August than October on the river. The water was still extremely low being less than .4 ft at the Towanda flood gauge which caused for some very tricky driving with my jet boat to get around the rocks. Heck, I was happy that it was above the 0ft mark like we had last month. For the first ten days the water was warm at 72 degrees with hot sunny days, not like fall at all. Then we fished in the rain for eight hours on the 11th and the water started to rise a little bit. Finally around the 15th we were getting the traditional fall weather that I like so much with the water temp down in the high fifties. The river is beautiful this time of year with the leaves turning all sorts of colors and you can also smell their pleasing aroma from the boat which adds to the pleasure of the day. It's just a great time to be outside. Now the leaves are great on the trees but when they drop on the water they become a bit of a nuisance as my jet sucks them up on the water intake. You're going along about 40mph and all of the sudden the motor is racing and you're not going anywhere. You check and the motor is plugged with leaves.

This is also the month that starts the pre winter feeding frenzy with the fish and catching 80 to 100 fish per day in the boat is not uncommon if you know what to do. As a matter of fact, the fish are so turned on to feeding that even if you don't know much about fishing in the river you should be catching 20 to 50 or so a day.

While most any lures will work this time of year, we have been using suspending jerk baits like the Rapala Husky Jerk or the Rapala X-Rap in size #8 or the tube jigs down at the bottom of the river, and the stick worms on a lead head jig such as the Senko, Yum Dinger, or Case Magic Stick. The Case "Jacks Worm" has also been a big producer.

But the most fun this time of year are the surface lures. I'm talking about the ones that you work right on top of the water such as my favorite, the Storms Chug Bug, or a Reble Pop-R, or maybe the Rapala Sputter Bug . They all work about the same. Cast the lure out and let it sit on top of the water for a couple of seconds then give your rod a twitch and make the lure spit water, pause a second and repeat the process. The fish's hit or strike at the lure may startle you and you may try to set the hook too soon. Wait until you feel the weight of the fish then set the hook. This may only take about a second so wait for it. The best time for surface lures is in low light conditions, morning, evening, or an overcast day in clear or light stained water. And don't only expect the small mouth bass, on many occasions I've had Northern Pike and Musky savagely hit the lure and knock it several feet into the air.

We are still seeing bald eagles almost every day but not in the numbers that we had during the summer. To see a mature bald eagle swoop down to the water, skim along the top and grab a fish in it's talons is quite a sight to see. I'll never get tired of watching it. The ducks are everywhere and there are still many great blue herons around. When we were fishing with our top water lures one morning a great blue heron took a big interest

in our lures. He would stretch his neck way up in the air, cock his head sideways as if to give the lures the “evil eye”. Just then a 14” small mouth bass hit my lure and that was just about all the temptation this heron could take. As I was reeling in my fish, the heron took flight and came after the bass. Now herons are usually afraid of humans but it was plain to see that this one wasn’t. He circled our boat twice so close you could have touched him with a fishing rod and as I lifted the fish into the boat he tried to land on my trolling motor not two foot in front of me! I could feel the wind from his feathers as I yelled at him to get away. There was no way he was getting this bass and I don’t know if he could have swallowed a fish that fat if he did get it. The heron flew back to the shore squawking loudly not 30ft away and watched as I released that lucky fish back to the river.

Towards the end of the month I had a couple of 7yr fishing clients on board who have become friends of mine over the years when I hooked into a 36” muskie. This is not big for a muskie, but I was using my light rod at the time and it was a hand full. It wasn’t a long fight maybe five minutes when it came to the net which my client held for me. He put the net on the boat floor with the muskie in it. I quickly measured the fish, took the lure out of it’s mouth, and started to lift it for a photo when it started to thrash about. It got out of my hands and landed on the boat seat, client number one made a grab for it and it flipped back to client number two who caught it only to have it flip out of his hands and back into the water. The whole ordeal lasted maybe two minutes in the boat and left us bewildered and laughing at the same time. Such is a day on the river.

There are some weird things that sometimes happen on the boat. That same day with the muskie as we were getting ready to leave for the access I got this awful thirst. I carry one of those gallon jugs with a spout in it from which I drink though. You know, lips on, suck in a big mouthful of water, and drink right? Well not this time. I sucked in a big mouthful and felt something moving in my mouth. I immediately spit it out in the river and saw it was a bee of all things! I guess I wasn’t quick enough because the little sucker stung me in the tongue! Once my friends found out that I wasn’t allergic to bee stings, they were having a good laugh because when the swelling started I sounded like a cross between Elmer Fudd and the Godfather with a mouthful of marbles. I sucked on ice all the way back to the access and the swelling started to subside by the time I was loading the boat on the trailer, but the laughter didn’t. With entertainment like that who needs to fish!

And now a little bit about fish conservation. We all like to go to the river and catch big sized small mouth bass. By that I mean at least bass over 15” in length which are on average 8 years old. A 20” bass is in it’s teens! I hear anglers all the time complain that all they catch are the small ones. The solution is simple, it’s called selective harvest. If you want to eat small mouth bass, harvest the 12” to 14” and let the big ones go after you’ve taken a photo to prove that you can catch the old ones. If you want the challenge of fighting more big old fish, just let them go to fight another day.

Well that's my report for this month on the Susquehanna River. Boat safely and I'll see you on the river.

Good Fishing

Lance

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