

## PROSPECTING FOR SPRINGTIME BRONZE

Spring thaws and rainy weather cause smallmouth streams to rise and become dingy or downright muddy. Despite these discouraging conditions, when water temperatures rise into the mid-50s, bronze backs often belie their reputation as homebodies by moving toward suitable spawning and rearing habitat. The increased volume of water facilitates this movement. Modern research indicates that these wandering smallies move in either direction a few hundred yards to several miles. Some move downstream, but the highest percentage favor upstream migration.

Pre-fishing reconnaissance can be valuable in locating the areas most likely to host spawning activity. Ideally, the most productive areas are in the shallows where calmer water with gravel or sand bottoms and nearby weedbeds are located. The gravel can be easily excavated to build the smallmouths' crude nests, allowing the adhesive eggs to incubate in the rapidly warming, thin water.

Adjacent weedbeds serve as a nursery for tiny bass fingerlings, where they can find minute insect larva



and other palatable organisms that promote growth while providing a hiding place from their all too numerous predators. Areas that also have deeper structure, like undercut banks or downed timber, provide prospective spawners a safe retreat when they are disturbed, forced from the shallows by a cold front, or need a holding area while awaiting nature's call. It is these holding areas that should be the targets of pre-spawn fishing.

Anglers who fish the same hole or rock pile that provided a bountiful catch last summer might be sorely disappointed by a lack of success there during the pre-spawn. Instead, try concentrating on eddies and the mouths of small tributaries. Fishing these areas requires a different approach, presentation and even a different fly selection.

Shallow water located adjacent to the stream's main flow often harbors eddies that sweep back upstream in a slowed circular motion. Eddies are also commonly found downstream from major current breaks near the edge of the stream's flow, such as bridge abutments or deadfalls. These whirlpools offer good resting lies for fish out of the force of the strongest currents as well as provide concentrations of food that sweeps past their positions. Since any food caught in the current can be swept into an eddy and brought

into the predator's view, use of a wide variety of imitations is possible. Nymphs, leeches, minnows, crayfish and other aquatic prey are on the menu.

The most aggressive feeders often locate at the initial break of the current where its flow begins to abate. This is the first area to explore. A cautious approach from the



downstream end of the eddy enables the angler to face and cast upstream. Short, accurate casts allow the fly to sweep naturally into the eddy. Less aggressive smallmouths will move to the slowest part of the eddy near its back edge. This might be the portion closest to the shallows or the structure that caused the eddy. Reposition near enough to the upstream end of the eddy so that casts made toward the downstream side allow a dead-drifted fly to sweep toward the casting

position. The weight of the fly and floating, sink-tip or full-sinking line should be matched to the prey being imitated, plus the eddy's depth and speed. A nymph, for example, might call for a slightly weighted pattern and floating line, while a crayfish imitation needs to be presented in contact with the bottom and requires a heavily weighted fly and sink-tip or full-sinking line.

Dead drifting must be a part of eddy presentations, but the best success is often the result of imparting intermittent action. One method of providing intermittent action is lifting the rod tip, then lowering it a few inches, followed by a strip of the line to remove slack. Experiment with the vigor of the imparted movement until a successful trigger has been established.

A wide variety of flies can be successful in eddies, but considering high, stained water, dark colors provide stark silhouettes the bass can see best. Streamer patterns tied in black or olive are good choices. The simple, ever-productive Woolly Bugger is often a good pattern for exploring eddies. Bead head versions in sizes 8 through 12 are near enough imitations of large nymphs, leeches, minnows and crayfish. Peacock herl bodies give them dark, iridescent sheens that add to their lifelike appearance. Coordinate the peacock herl with olive or black marabou tails and matching palmered hackles. Dry-fly quality hackle gives a spiked appearance, whereas webbie oversized hackle adds action to the fly's body.

Clousers are another viable fly choice as a searching pattern in eddies. A size-8 hook weighted with extra small (1/50 ounce), small (1/36 ounce) or medium (1/24 ounce) barbell eyes allows the angler to adjust the depth of the presentation and control the fly's drift. Color combinations that include brown, olive and chartreuse are successful in stained water.

A second productive area for spring smallmouth bass is the mouths of tributaries. While these smaller waterways might also be affected by high, stained water, they will rise, settle and fall much more rapidly than the rivers they feed. River-dwelling smallmouths, some of surprising size, enter the mouths of tributaries and even travel some distance upstream to forage while avoiding the rigors of battling strong currents. Smaller, clearer water requires stealthy approaches, gentle casts and perhaps more realistic fly patterns. Fishing upstream using short casts or simply reaching the rod forward to drop the fly on the water spooks fewer fish.

Dead drifting the mouths of tributaries can be the best tactic and should be tried first. If action is needed, very subtle movements are often best. Nymphs, minnows and crayfish patterns are obvious fly choices in these smaller, clearer streams. Flies should generally be downsized from the river offerings depending, of course, on the comparative size of the stream. Upstream presentations in tiny streams make a lot of sense, but you must avoid casting shadows over potential fish lies and accidentally hooking overhanging brush.

Large mayfly and damselfly nymphs work well in tributaries. Flies tied "in the round" allow the current to tumble the fly without causing it to appear unnatural when it's upside down. Sparsely tied, lightly weighted streamers on sizes 10 and 12 nymph hooks such as TMC 200R can entice hungry smallmouths. White marabou streamers produce well, as do sparsely tied hair-wing patterns.

Switching both tactics and locations can put fly fishers in the smallmouth bass action in early spring. Choose dark-colored flies for darkened water and progressively lighter colors as the water clears. Remember to release all magnificent game fish.  
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