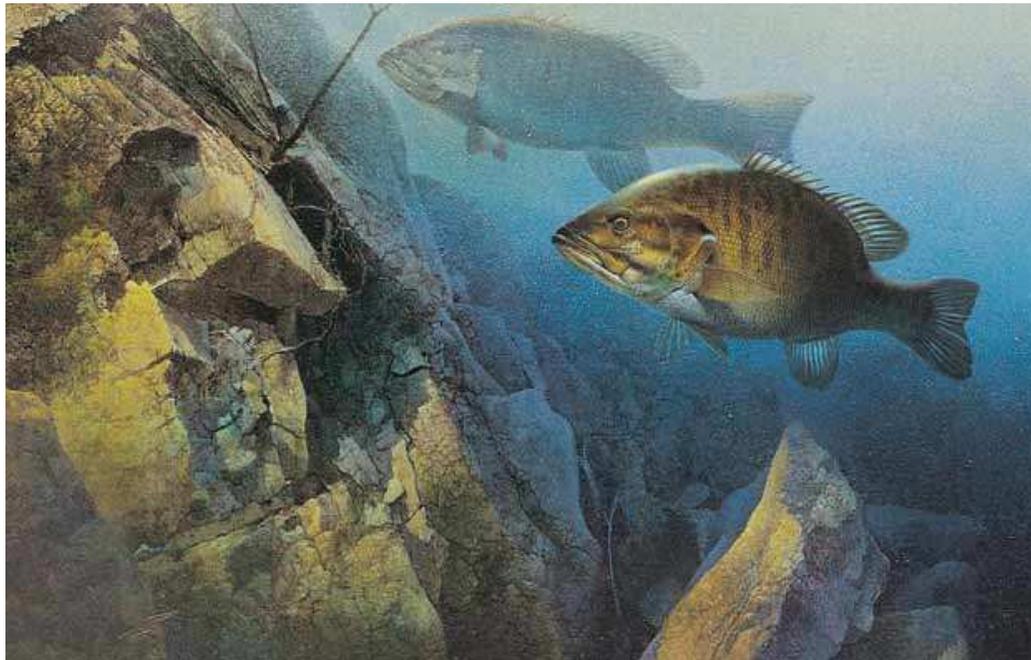


In-Fisherman

THE WORLD'S TOP 10 SMALLMOUTH SPOTS

BY MATT STRAW

Last year in this issue we reported that smallmouth fisheries were experiencing a Bronze Age Renaissance across North America. For a variety of reasons, more and bigger smallmouths are turning up from the Atlantic to the Pacific, in the North, and in Dixie. As Al Lindner says, "If you're not catching bigger smallmouths than you ever have in your life, you're snoozin'." Our Top 10 aren't listed in any particular order. Same for the Second Ten.



1. Lake Erie, Ohio-Ontario-New York-Pennsylvania – Of all the smallmouth waters in North America, Erie seems likely to be a perennial topper for lists like this one. Biologists report that Erie experienced perhaps its largest-ever smallmouth hatch in 1992. In 1998, those fish will average 20 inches or better. Always one of the best numbers fisheries in the smallmouth world, Erie will be one of the hottest trophy fisheries this year.

When the bite's on, an average fisherman can boat 200 smallmouths in a day, and odds are growing that one of those fish will top 10 pounds. Fish over 9 pounds have been taken on Erie, and some experts believe that world-record-class fish are possible.

By late April, as water temperatures climb into the high 40°F range, smallmouths are caught on hair jigs and bait where the deep available water approaches shoreline-related reefs and points. Soon after, smallies chew crankbaits, as if they'd never seen one before, in harbors and flats near shoreline rocks, and in some cases, weedbeds. Lakewide, bass tend to spawn sometime in May. Then as they move back out to deeper reefs and humps, crankbaits, spinnerbaits, hair jigs, and livebait tactics take over.

Through summer, most guides work the deep base and sides of rocky reefs or deep flats with "sandbag" rigs (also called Slinky rigs) and nightcrawlers, leeches, or minnows. Another hot bite occurs in September, as smallmouths make one final hair-raising invasion into shallow water, where they slam anything that passes by.

Guides: Canadian side – Greg Horoky, 519/738-3095, Bill's Guide Service, 519/738-1134 or 519/738-1133; American side -- J Fofrich, 419/729-2181; Bass Islands – Pat Chrysler, 419/285-4631; New York – Dan Dietzen, 716/672-5868. Lodging: Lorain County Visitor's Bureau, 800/334-1673; Pennsylvania – Erie Chamber of Commerce, 814/454-7191; Canadian side – St. Thom Tourist Association, 519/631-8188.

2. Lake St. Clair, Michigan-Ontario -- Professional bass ace Kevin Van Dam calls it "the best smallmouth lake in the world. When bass are spawning and I can spot them in the 3- to 5-foot depths and select for larger fish, it's possible to catch 100 four-pounder in a day." How many lakes can make that claim?

Sounds like an exaggeration until you visit this urban wonderland. Surrounded by Detroit and Mt. Clemens in Michigan, and Windsor on the Ontario side, it seems impossible that such a lake could produce that kind of fishing. But smallmouths inhabit the entire shoreline of this 420-square-mile lake. Maximum depth is only 25 feet, perfect for smallies throughout. Clearing due to zebra mussel activity has allowed weeds to grow deeper and thicker than in the past, and smallmouths inhabit the edges and pockets of milfoil and coontail beds.

Ron Perrine, president of Bass'N Bait Company, likes Mitchells Bay in Ontario. "Fish average a solid three pounds there," he says. Other hot spots include the entire shoreline from Gaukler Point in St. Clair Shores to Belvidere Bay near Selfridge Air Force Base. Spinnerbaits, tubes, and suspending minnowbaits account for lots of smallmouths all over Lake St. Clair. Ripping minnowbaits as fast and erratically as possible over pockets in massive weedbeds takes both largemouths and smallmouths throughout summer. When fish are less active, try tubes, Texas rigs, or the Float 'n' Fly technique. The usual bait rigging techniques with nightcrawlers and minnows seldom fail here, either.

Information: Lakeside Tackle Shop Hotline in St. Clair Shores, 248/473-2033. Guides: Canadian side – Vincent's Guide Service 519/352-1148; American side – Bob Korznowski, 810/954-2612. Lodging: River Crab Bluewater Inn in St Clair, 800/468-3727.

3. Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin -- Few waters have the classic look of Sturgeon Bay for smallmouth bass. Shallow, rocky substrate dominates points, humps, and shorelines around the Door County Peninsula and its many islands. Sturgeon Bay is about 100 miles by 30 miles of awesome smallmouth habitat. Huge rocky flats pocketed with reefs and rock piles extend the entire length of the Peninsula, including the Lake Michigan side. And literally every foot of shoreline is inhabited by smallmouths at one time or another during the year, creating one of the finest bass fisheries in the world.



“Catching 100 bass a day is easy during a good bite,” according to professional guide, Dale Stroschein. “And several of those fish could weigh over 5 pounds, with a dozen or so over 4 pounds. The tip of the peninsula is lightly fished, and smallmouths are everywhere.”

Located straight north of Green Bay, Wisconsin, Sturgeon Bay smallies generally spawn in June, which is a good time to visit. Natural reproduction has been exceptionally high the past several years, according to biologists, who report numbers good. Dive report images of reefs carpeted with bronze. September is another good time to visit, when big walleyes and smallmouths chew crankbaits along rocky breaks in 10 to 15 feet of water.

Water is so clear that at times it's possible to spot fish in depths exceeding 10 feet. Every retrieve might lead in a bronze convoy.

Guides: Dale Stroschein (lodging, too, at Sandy Bay Resort), 414/746-9289; Tim Dawidiuk, 414/746-9916. Fishing, lodging, and guides: Door County Chamber of Commerce, 414/743-4456.

4. Pickwick Lake, Tennessee – Bill Dance loves Pickwick Lake, and not only because it's 1 1/2 hours from his driveway. “Pickwick's smallmouth fishery is fabulous,” he says. “It's right on the southern boundary of the smallmouth's natural range, with a high-protein forage mix. It's not a Lake Erie for quantity, but it's world class for quality. I've caught only three smallies over 8 pounds and two of those came from Pickwick.

“It's a year 'round fishery, with peaks in spring and fall,” Dance says. “For a monster, go between the end of February and the end of April, when fish are moving shallower. Deep fish are always available in spring, too. What makes Pickwick unique is the water quality, the forage base, and even though it's a noted smallmouth lake, it keeps producing monsters.

“In spring, locate prime spawning banks, where small chunk rock mixes with pea gravel, shale, and red or tan clay. Biologists say Pickwick smallies over 2 pounds key primarily on shad, so I tend not to fish smaller lures. Even in spring, I like 5-inch grubs and crankbaits like the Fat Free Shad in 5 to 11 feet of water. When fish are down to 17, I vertically jig a spoon or jig-n-pig. I like the lightest jig I can possibly use, which usually is 1/4 ounce. I match it with big pork, to keep the profile large and the drop speed slow. Deeper, I might go to 1/2 ounce.”

Threadfin migrate into creek arms during fall. “It's one of the most dependable patterns I know,” Dance says. “A white spinnerbait pork combo whacks 'em where they set up, about 1/3 of the way into the creek arms. Key spots are turns in the creek channel adjacent to bluff banks. I catch most of my fish from slopes with a change in soil composition, where limestone gives way to clay, or something.”

Dance is protective of his pets. “Smallies must be released,” he says. “These fish are a prime commodity. Big ones have survived some tough times, and we're the deciding factor determining if and how great fisheries like this survive.”

Guide: Steve Hacker, 205/383-1058. Lodging: Key West Inn, 800/833-0555. Information: Hardin County Chamber of Commerce 800/552-3866.

5. Candlewood Lake, Connecticut – Candlewood Lake is nestled in wooded seclusion near Danbury, Connecticut. This 5,400-acre playground supports good numbers of both largemouth and smallmouth bass. “It keeps getting better for smallmouths, while largemouth fishing has slackened somewhat,” according to Rich Zaleski, In-Fisherman's contributor in the East. “The size and number of available smallmouth more than make up for the decline in largemouths, however. At least,” he laughed, “that's how I feel

about it.

"On a good day, I average 20 to 30 smallmouths. And they're good fish," Zaleski says. "A limit of fish averaging over 3 pounds can be caught throughout summer when fishing is best on 15- to 20-foot-deep humps." Locals take lots of smallmouths by fishing vertically with a shiner or an alewife one foot off bottom. But Zaleski prefers to fish 'em with bladebaits. He drops something like a Reef Runner Cicada, a Heddon Sonar, or a Silver Buddy, alternating between rips and pauses. Active fish hit at the top of the rip.

Fall is also a key time on Candlewood. The bite may shift to deep-diving cranks ripped along the tops of humps or along points of the main lake as dropping water temperatures approach 50°F. Later, hair jigs and finesse tactics along the steepest drops on these areas take over.

Lodging: Danbury Chamber of Commerce, 203/743-5565. Guides and information: Hank's Tackle, 203/743-2221.

6. Chequamegon Bay, Wisconsin – Picturesque walls of rock surround some of the nearby Apostle Islands, where sheer cliffs rise from the cold blue depths to a high vantage above Lake Superior. With so much rock to choose from, the smallmouths of Chequamegon Bay oddly prefer the more gradual sand slopes of the eastern shore. And the fish are fat and sassy, according to Lindner.

"A one-fish limit on Chequamegon Bay was instituted about four years ago," Al says. "That one smallmouth must measure 22 inches or more. As a result, smallies over 5 pounds are practically a daily occurrence, and I've spotted fish over 7 pounds. Everybody I talk to who was there last year scored big time, with smallmouths from 2 1/2 to over 5 pounds. Protective regulations have created an amazing fishery, a world-class fishery."

Smallmouth anglers in the know were able to keep Chequamegon Bay to themselves until recently. When the word got out, more trophy regulations were already in place. "As surprising as it seems, in water that cold at that latitude, Chequamegon has a number of 22-inchers, due to the regulations," Al says.

According to Mike Huff, biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, smallmouth hatches have exceeded the average for four years, with good over-winter survival rates. Fish of all sizes are available in healthy proportions. Peak times to visit include mid-May to the end of June and all of September.

"Chequamegon Bay has rolling sand dunes underwater," Al explains. "Between them are grooves filled with wood. That's where the smallies are livin' when they're home." In spring, Al found fish roaming the shorelines. "The water is extremely clear," he says. "So spot fishing is fabulous. Pick out the giants and pitch minnowbaits or Husky Jerks."

In September, smallies key on steeper drops, bottoming out in 25 to 35 feet of water. Work jigs and bait, hair jigs, and plastics slowly on the sharpest drops along transitions between hard and soft bottom. Fish average a solid 3 pounds most days, and chances for one over 8 might be as good as anywhere in the country.

Guides, maps, bait, tackle, and fishing information: Roger LaPenter, Angler's All in Ashland, Wisconsin, 715/682-5754. Lodging: Chequamegon Hotel, 715/682-9095; American, 800/634-3444.

7. Rainy Lake, Ontario – If Al Lindner had to choose one smallmouth fishery to spend his summer on, he wouldn't hesitate. "I'd pick Rainy Lake in a heartbeat," he admits. "Lake of the Woods is fun, but Rainy is just explosive. Smallies are growing, and we have

seen the top end yet, because the population is changing. Walleye netting has been so heavy on the Canadian side that walleyes are in trouble," Al explains, "because smallmouths moved in and took over most of the habitat the walleyes vacated. Biologists are finding them 40 to 60 feet deep by late summer, and nobody targets these fish."

Smallies over six pounds are showing up where they never grew so large in the past. "The odd thing about Rainy is how smallies feed and how deep they go," Al adds. "In May, most smallmouths are on classic rock bars and reefs. By mid-July, those spots are history. Fish drop deep to rock humps that top off at 25 to 38 feet, using the structure to ambush drifting schools of suspending smelt."

Rainy's bass are fish eaters, according to local biologists, and they look up to feed. Smallmouth fishermen that stick with bottom-oriented presentations may have trouble locating fish in summer. "I swim jigs and grubs in Rainy, as opposed to bottom hopping," Al advises. "I had success with Normark Husky Jerks. I think suspended, up-oriented smallmouths are predominating, even more than in the past."

Smallmouths in Rainy key on larger baits, such as 6-inch minnowbaits, 1/2-ounce and larger spinnerbaits, and large deep-diving cranks. Smelt are the key forage, and hooked smallies often cough up smelt fully 1/3 their body length. "The old axiom about downsizing for smallmouths doesn't work on Rainy, or anywhere else these days," Al says.

Darryl McLeod, area biologist for the Ministry of Natural Resources, says proposals are planned to protect the smallmouth fishery. "Especially the larger fish," he says, "which go deep by late July and stay deep through early fall, into September, so they're not targeted heavily yet. Numbers are good right now, and what we're seeing is the result of an excellent and abundant 1987 year class."

So many great smallmouth fisheries exist in Northwest Ontario that it's difficult to name just one, but Rainy can handle the pressure.

Resorts: Canadian side -- Ministry of Tourism, 807/223-7601. Coppen's Resort, 807/481-2564; Rainy Lake Houseboats, 800/559-9188. Guides: Harry Bell, Rainy Lake Guide Service, 807/274-6895. Also ask the resorts if guides are available.

8. Dale Hollow Tennessee -- Billy Westmoreland is the legend of Dale Hollow Reservoir, and Dale Hollow is legendary among smallmouth anglers. This is the lake that produced the world-record (depending on who you talk to), a 10-pound 14-ouncer. And Westmoreland himself has captured two over 10 -- maybe the only person to ever accomplish that.

Dale Hollow is a beautiful shade of aquamarine, surrounded by steep hills and thick, green hardwood forests mixed with a modicum of cedar. "Fishing has been real good," Westmoreland reports. "We're catching numbers again, since the 18-inch minimum was in place four years ago. Lots of fish out there now. Not as many big fish, maybe, but Dale Hollow always has a few giants."

March, April, and May are key months, as are December and January, Westmoreland says. "During prespawn and spawn, crank jigs, little grubs, Silver Buddys, just about anything works," he adds. "Smallmouths move into 8 to 12 feet of water. Find the spawning banks, those gradual slopes of gravel and red or yellow clay. Smallmouths will be a long cast from the bank. I rarely catch better fish in close. Expect 12 to 15 nice smallmouths on a good day, mostly in the 3 1/2- to 4-pound range, with a real good shot at a 6, even an 8.

"In December and January, work deeper water. Smallmouths move from late summer spots into 15 to 25 feet of water on the sides of points on the main lake and major creek arms. Look for points that drop steeply into 30 to 40 feet of water. The Silver Buddy catches 90 percent of my fish then, with the Hoss Fly or a jig-n-pig accounting for the rest."

Guides: Fred McClintock, 931/243-2142; Mike Johnson, 931/864-3362. Lodging: Horse Creek Resort, 931/243-2125; Star Poir Resort, 931/864-3115; and 15 other marinas with lodging, too.

9. Kentucky Lake, Kentucky-Tennessee -- In the wooded, low rolling hills of southern Kentucky and northern Tennessee lie a pair of long, narrow reservoirs with wonderful populations of smallmouth bass. Kentucky Lake and Barkley Lake, and the intervening tour mecca known as the Land Between The Lakes, are well known to traveling fishermen. The lakes are famous for fabulous largemouth fishing, but fewer folks seem aware of the world-class potential of the smallmouth fisheries there.

"Fishing has been great on Kentucky," says Tommy Akin, a public relations specialist who works with Bill Dance in Tennessee. "The draw is size more than numbers, but it's easy to land 10 to 20 smallmouths in the 2 1/2- to 7-pound class during peak times. Kentucky Lake is truly a trophy fishery.

"Fishing peaks in July and August," Akin says, "which usually is a down time for smallmouths on big Southern reservoirs. At that time, bass move out on the river bars on the main lake. The best bars are composed of gravel and chunk rock, and the best way to approach them is with Carolina rigs, spinnerbaits, and jig-n-pig combos.

"March and April are key months, too," Akin continues. "Smallies move up on shallow gravel bars to spawn in 4- to 6-foot depths. That's right," Akin anticipated my next question, "the water's not so clear as in deeper lakes like Pickwick or Dale Hollow. Jigs, minnowbaits, and plastics rigs prove consistent in spring on Kentucky. And if fishing's not good, it's a short drive to Barkley.

"The area has a long growing season down here, producing good fish quickly. Yet, even in summer, fish are seldom deeper than feet, so they're easily approached by most fishermen."

Guide: Glen Stubblefield at Buchanan's Resort, 901/642-2828. Lodging and camping: Paris Landing State Park, 901/642-4311.

10. Lake Champlain, Vermont-New York -- In-Fisherman contributor Rich Zaleski was one of the few not surprised at the results of the B.A.S.S. Top 100 Pro-Am on Lake Champlain in September 1997. "All the pros envisioned running south and fishing murky water for largemouths," Zaleski says. "Instead, they ran north and fished clear water for both species. Five of the top 10 places we won with smallmouths. In this tournament, a 2-pound average put you in 97th place. It took a 3-pound average just to make the money. Dion Hibdon came in second, fishing smallmouths, with 56.9 pounds for three days"

Smallmouth fishing on Champlain is excellent and unexploited, Zaleski says. "It's an amazing fishery," he adds. "Lots of smallmouths are caught on weed and shallow rock patterns, even though the fish have lots of deep rocky structure to choose from. It's the best combination largemouth-smallmouth fishery in the country, even better than the Thousand Islands area (on the St. Lawrence River) was in its prime. How long will it stay that way? Nobody knows. We're catching smallmouths that have never before seen lures."

Peak time is September or October, according to Zaleski. "Smallmouth fishing is best on the Vermont side, though it's good in New York, too. When fish are bedding in June, the fishing is fantastic, too. In Vermont, a special catch-and-release season opens the second Saturday in April and runs until the season opener on the second Saturday in June. Season opens the third Saturday of June in New York. "St. Alban's Bay and Mallets Bay are the hottest areas with the best accommodations," Zaleski added.

Lodging: St. Alban's -- Chamber of Commerce, 802/524-2444. Lodging throughout area (including Mallets Bay) -- Regional Chamber in Burlington, 802/863-3489. For a free publication called the Lake Champlain Fishing Guide, Vermont Fish and Wildlife

