

Fall is one of the most rewarding times of the year to fly fish for smallmouth bass because the fish go on a feeding spree and the foliage is magnificent.

Fall Smallmouth Fly Fishing Tactics

by
Harry Murray

Fall can be the most rewarding time of the year to fly fish for smallmouth bass. The beauty of the magnificent fall foliage along the rivers helps one feel close to the Creator, and the cool streams prompt the large bass to go on a feeding spree.

Early in September the bass are spread uniformly throughout the rivers, and you can get great action with surface flies and bugs as well as underwater flies. The most exciting dry fly fishing for

smallmouth bass I know comes by fishing the Mr. Rapidan Skater Dry Fly size 8 to those fish feeding on natural damselflies as they buzz across the surface of the rivers.

A very effective tactic is to locate those pool tails that are formed by ledges running across the river with water three to four feet deep immediately upstream of them. Wade into the river 100 feet upstream of these ledges. Dress the Mr. Rapidan Skater and your 9-foot, 2X leader

liberally with silicone cream and cast down and across stream 30 feet at a 45-degree angle. Raise your fly rod to a 45-degree angle out over the river and skate the fly across the surface of the river a foot every 10 seconds. On large rivers like the James and New you can fish all the way across the stream, catching many nice bass all the way. On smaller rivers like the North Fork of the Shenandoah you can slowly wade and fish your way right down to the ledge, skating the fly systematically



The Murray's Cream Strymph is one of the most productive flies one can use in the fall.



The Murray's Mad Tom is the fly the author likes to use when he is fishing for large bass in deep pools and runs.

over all of the tails of the pools.

Another effective surface tactic in September is to fish the aquatic grassbeds with the Shenandoah Damsel Popper in sizes 4 and 6. Many aquatic grassbeds form along the river banks; others are found around ledge outcroppings in the middle of the rivers. If the water around the grassbeds is less than three feet deep, they are mainly feeding stations for the bass, and you will do best here in low light levels at dusk and dawn. If the water is much deeper, however, these areas can be homes for the bass as well as feeding stations, and you can catch many nice bass here throughout the day.

You can either wade or float parallel to these grassbeds about 40 feet out from them. Cast your Shenandoah Damsel Popper in tight against the grass and after allowing it to lie motionless for 10 seconds, give it two slow six-inch pulls with your line hand every ten seconds until you fish it out 10 feet. Then pick it up and cast it to a new spot six feet further along the grassbed. Continuing this tactic all along the whole grassbed will enable you to

catch many bass.

The whole month of September provides great fishing to bass chasing shiner minnows over gravel bars at dusk

and dawn. This action is manifested by seeing the minnows flee in a splashy dash as they run to evade the marauding bass. Frequently at dusk you will spot several chases taking place in water two feet deep along a river bank. Pause a few minutes and you may see many more chases occurring over an area the size of a tennis court. Wade carefully within range and cast a Silver Outcast Streamer in size 4 out in front of the closest chase. You will seldom see the bass; your target is the fleeing school of minnows. Drop your fly three feet in front of the minnows and strip it back rapidly through the minnows. You know the bass is behind the minnows, and this broadside appearance of your fly presents an easy target for the bass. If you don't get him on the first cast, place several more casts into the general area even after the chase is over. Continue to wade carefully through the whole area looking for the chases. If you are in the right place at the right time, you can get an evening of outstanding fishing.

The author admires a nice smallmouth bass that he caught after seeing him leaping to feed on adult damselflies.





The author fishes the Mr. Rapidan Skater with great success anytime he sees smallmouths feed on adult damselflies in the fall.

For the first several weeks of October you can get some of the same surface action and streamer fishing you had in September. When the water temperature drops in mid-October, however, most of the large bass undertake a mini-migration by leaving the shallows and heading to the deepest pools and cuts between the ledges. This is not a move of a great distance: In one area I fish in October, many large bass move for only several hundred yards to hold between two river crossing ledges in water five feet deep in a 200-foot-long pool.

An easy way to catch these smallmouths between the ledges is to wade into the river below the downstream ledge and move right up behind the ledge. My favorite fly here is the Cream Strymph in

sizes 4 and 6 because it mimics the chub minnows here, and it can be fished effectively upstream. Using a 9-foot, 2X Bright Butt Leader on a floating 7-weight line, you can cast up or up and across stream, covering all of the water you can reach from this spot. Then you wade across the river below the ledge, stopping every 30 feet to thoroughly fish the water above the ledge. As you cast upstream, allow your Strymph to sink deeply. Then use a six-inch line hand stripping action to swim your fly along the stream bottom just slightly faster than the current. Once you cover all of the water you can reach from below the ledge you can wade up the side of this cut along the bank and continue to catch many large bass by fishing the Cream Strymph up and across stream

along the stream bottom up to the next ledge.

Some streams such as the New River and the South Fork of the Shenandoah River have many deep pools that hold large bass in late October and November. The natural mad tom is one of the main foods for the bass here, and you can catch many of these fish by fishing a Murray's Mad Tom in sizes 4 and 6 deeply in these areas.

Start in the heads of these pools right below the riffles by either wading or floating, and cast your Mad Tom across the current. After it sinks deeply, strip it six inches every 10 seconds to crawl it across the bottom of the pool. Gradually move slowly down the pool using this across-stream tactic until you reach the lower rif-

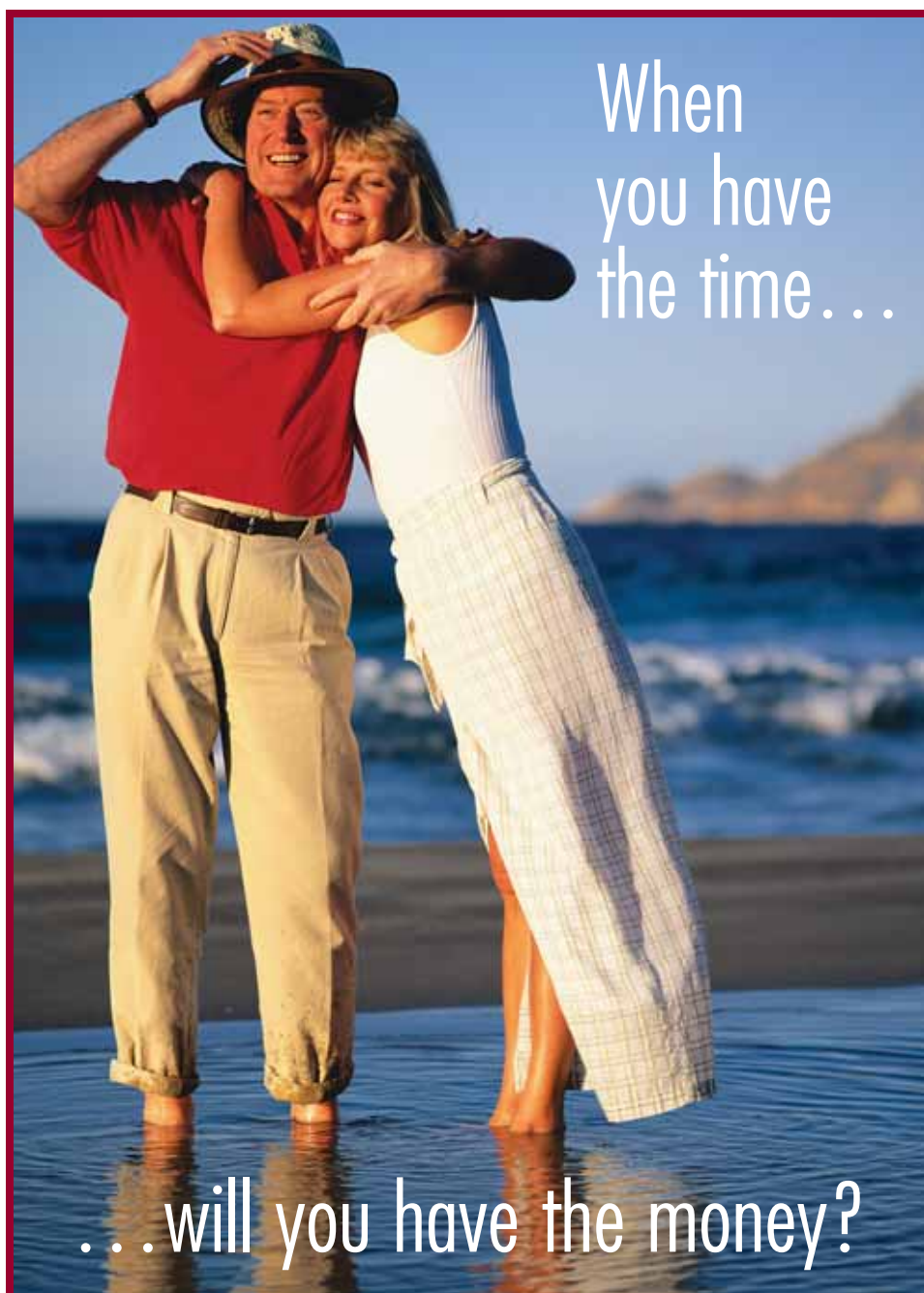
fle. If the pool is several hundred feet wide and you are floating the river in a canoe, a good ploy is to turn to paddle and fish back up the far side of the pool after fishing the near side.

The deeper you can fish your Mad Tom in these big pools, the more big bass you'll catch—so you want to go to a fast sinking tip fly line if the current is exceptionally fast. One in which the first 10 to 15 feet sinks at two to four inches per second is ideal. Be sure to use a five-foot leader with these sinking tip lines in order to take full advantage of the sinking qualities of the line. The tactics for fishing these sinking tip lines are much the same as with a floating line except that when you feel the bass take your fly you should set the hook with more force by using both your line hand and the rod in order to telegraph your strike down to the bass.

Yes, fly fishing for smallmouth bass in the fall is too good to miss. Whatever your motivation, you'll find a day on the river very gratifying.

For a weekly report on the timely conditions on the smallmouth and trout streams, showing the best locations and tactics, see www.murraysflyshop.com.

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