

# SPRING MIGRATION

When it comes to river smallmouth, pinpointing when they start moving from their wintering areas is not an exact science. In 30 years of trying to target their first movement out of these holes, all I can say for certain, is that river smallmouth move sooner than most anglers think.

We all know that the official start of spring cannot be identified by the date on the calendar, the vernal equinox or some fuzzy rodent that did or did not see their shadow--sorry Phil. The best indicator we have here in the tristate area, is foliage. While I am not suggesting you take a complete interest in your wife's perennials, I am suggesting you pay close attention to when the green shoots of her crocus, tulip and daffodils start to break the surface. Once the first shoots pop out of the ground, you can make a safe bet that smallmouth in your area river, are edging out of their winter protection and into modest current seeking forage.



Once that happens, the bass begin their spring journey. Still several weeks away from the first spawn, smallmouth will start to migrate away from wintering areas. The journey for some is short, but for others it is three, four or even five miles that can take weeks to cover. Most follow migration paths that have been mapped out for generations. For lakes and rivers, smallmouth seek current and current breaks to follow from one feeding zone to the next. These migration paths and spawning areas are predetermined by an almost mystical factors that biologists are just beginning to fully understand.

As an angler, finding these pathways and the associated holding areas is like a treasure hunter finding Cortes' map to secret Aztec gold. Only in this case, the treasure is BRONZE. The value in some of these pathways is that bass come in waves, as one group leaves, another wave of fresh fish moves in. No matter where you fish, there are key hold-over areas where a group of bass will pause, recharge and feed before moving on to the next location. Here is the best part, unless there is a catastrophic change, bass will use these same migration highways for generations. So, once you find these routes and hold areas, they will produce for years and years to come.

Unlike lakes and impoundments, rivers rise and fall almost daily. Snow melt and rainfall will increase flow from year to year and higher flows are just a part of early spring fishing. I state this because most all the migration routes and hold areas that I have found offer some level of current break and protection. Smallmouth will travel one side of the river for long distances and then transition to the opposite side using current breaks caused by islands, ledges, and trenches to step across the river. Bass will be in some degree of current. The key word here is that they follow current breaks, areas alongside stronger current where bass have an advantage and can move without being in the strongest current flows.

Some bass will journey to mid river destinations close to wintering areas, but an overwhelming percentage of smallmouth will be heading to tributaries miles upriver. These tributaries can be small as a stream runs, or as large as deep creeks and rivers.

While 90% of my river fishing is here on the Susquehanna, I learned this lesson on the Delaware River watching American Shad make their way

up the river. Shad will use banks, mid-river channels, ledges and deep gravel runs along shoals to make their trek up-river. For decades, anglers who found these migration paths will stand, or anchor their boats in the same areas they have fished for decades. Depending on the level of flow, they will adjust their position a few feet until they find the fish in the proper current, but it is always along a migration path that shad have used for generations. It is much the same with smallmouth and walleye. Come late February into March, bass transition from protected wintering areas and slowly migrate to spawning grounds.

The main difference between the shad migration and smallmouth migration is that bass put on the feed bag and eat. This journey, whether short or long, is a time when bass will simply not pass up a meal. And what a smorgasbord awaits them. Just about every forage fish in the river is active at this time as their spawning rituals span as early as March for some, to as late as June for others. Pods of minnows collect in and around these current breaks. For the Susquehanna, emerald shiners, creek chubs, bluntnose minnows, darters and dace will all be using these same areas.



Crayfish, and aquatic insects are also beginning to show themselves. Stonefly larva will be among the first of the larger insects to emerge. When they do, there is more than just a chance that anglers will find a stonefly or 10... sunning themselves on their hat and jacket. So keep your eyes on the water's surface, because if they are rising, the bass could be ringing the surface nearby.

Lure choices are rather simple. Suspended Jerks, Swimbaits, Hair Jigs, Tubes, Creatures and even Crankbaits are solid choices. My personal go to for the March is a Megabass Vision OneTen, a 3.5" Keitech Easy Shiner on a 16<sup>th</sup> ounce Jig Master swimbait jig and of course a Fitt Chillee Willee on a Ned Rig.

River Bronze is indeed the treasure anglers seek come late winter and early spring. Scope out these migration paths and create your own treasure map. And keep it close to the vest matey. A good treasure map always leads to the bounty!

