



The anxiety of Cabin Fever was so great several years ago that I made a decision not to winterize my boat and take every opportunity to fish for smallmouth bass whenever possible that winter. Little did I realize just how much this would change my outlook on the angling prospects winter months have to offer. Until that moment, winter fishing for bass was limited to a few six inch holes and a small jigging rod.

Portions of the Delaware, Lehigh, Juniata and Susquehanna Rivers do not ice over except for extremely cold winter days. There have been times during February where I had to contend with some floating ice, but for the most part many areas remained open and accessible by boat all winter long. Except for ice and snow storms the river launches also remain clear and in good shape, especially those that get direct afternoon sun.

There are a number of aspects that make winter bass angling so appealing. One is the size of the fish. Unlike the smaller bass, the larger bass seem to actively feed all winter long. It is uncommon to catch bass under

13-14 inches once the water temp dips below 40F. While the cold water temp slows their metabolism down, the larger fish still continue to feed. The likelihood of catching large bass is always a plus. Another aspect is the lack of crowds. On most winter days, the river is absent of any other boat traffic. I can arrive late morning and have few concerns about finding a parking spot.

Recently while at an outdoors show, a fellow angler asked; "How do you handle the cold this time of year?" Being such a common question, I decided to turn the word COLD into an acronym that may help anglers venturing out during the winter. **C-O-L-D** stands for **Comfort, Opportunity, Location** and **Depth**.

C is for Comfort. If an angler is not dressed well enough to remain comfortable, the chances of success are greatly reduced. Let's be honest, the outing may come down to only a handful of strikes per angler. If your mind is focused on frozen feet, wanting a cup of hot coffee and not tuned into the fishing, you are very likely to miss a strike. If

Northeastern Angler e-Magazine

you are cold, thirsty, hungry or fatigued, take a brake. Put the rod down, pour a cup of hot coffee, grab a bite and warm up. When comfortable, pick up the rod and start fishing again. It may sound odd, but being comfortable allows you to focus.

O is for Opportunity. If there is a four letter word in regards to winter fishing, it is wind. Nothing can ruin a nice day like a stiff winter breeze. Even modest wind can drop the wind chill temp far below the actual temperature. Wind also interferes with keeping the lure in position and impacts the ability to sense the strike. Watch the weather and when possible, hit the water at opportune times. Bright sun can be the kiss of death in the summer months. It can push fish deep or turn the bite completely off. In the winter, the sun is a welcome friend. It will help keep you warm and can warm the water up as much as a degree or two from one day to the next. Two to three consecutive days with daytime temperatures above the norm can turn fish on. Take such opportunities to get out on the water.

L is for Location. When the water temps fall, the majority of the bass in any river will be in specific types of water. The phrase I hear most often is a wintering hole. This is something to pay attention to. In the winter, bass will be in locations where they will not have to exert a lot of energy to stay put. They will also find wintering holes that protect them from rising water. A good spot is one that blocks the flow of water and still offers protection even if the river significantly rises. There will be lots of eddy type water, but the productive holes will have this advantage over others. I prefer long or large eddies over small ones. Each may produce strikes but the best bass are in areas where they can move short distances to remain in light current. In the low waters of summer, I study areas to find new wintering holes. May sound crazy, but I find most of my better spots when the outside temp is 90F and the river is at or near the season's low. Another attribute is the type of bottom. I find that it cannot be too rocky or so soft that the bottom is covered in old leaves and debris. Often the bass have mud spots on their bellies where they rest on the bottom.

D is for Depth. Depth is an important aspect of success in the winter. Many make the mistake of searching out the deepest holes in the river. I am not saying that there are not active fish in 25' of water, just that most of my productive areas are rarely more than 8 to 10 feet deep. Greater depths may work for some anglers, but has never worked for me where river smallmouth bass are concerned. I look for a sloping with a semi soft bottom, perhaps a mix of rock, sand and mud on the bottom. In many cases the topography of the bank helps to define what is below the water line. Depth may also vary depending on the amount of sunshine. Fish will move into shallow areas



if the sun is warming up the water. Shallow in this instance may be moving from 8 to 10 feet and into 3 to 4 feet.

The next questions that usually come up are suggestions of what to throw? My advice is to keep it simple the first few times out and get a feel for what works best. Adding a long list of potential lures only creates problems, find a few high confidence lures and build upon that success. If I had only 4 items to bring along with me, I would choose a hair jig, a tube, a small trick worm and the timeless curl tail grub. Each of these jig-style lures is presented pretty much the same way. They are baits worked along the bottom to represent baitfish, crawfish or other terrestrial insects. More often than not, limiting the action to very

short, slow twitches works best. There will be times when the bass will dictate a more aggressive action, but start slow.

As the water temperatures drop below 40F most every living creature in the river slows down. Letting the jig sit almost motionless is one of the keys to success. Even when sitting on the bottom, the lures suggested are never completely motionless. The fur on the rabbit or fox hair jig will breathe when in the water. The hair wafts even with the slightest current. If rigged with a soft plastic trailer, the tips of the trailer are buoyant and lift and fall slowly resembling claws, legs or tentacles. Likewise the strips on the tube or the tail on the grub will offer a subtle movement in the soft current. Just the slightest movement can cause a strike. Trick worms on a jig will seem motionless, but the tip of the tail vibrates. Keep in mind that smallmouth will be in these spots mentioned earlier. Even if not actively feeding, they'll often be very aware of the lure's presence, often just inches away waiting for just the slightest sign of life. This slight motion, or light drag along the bottom is what triggers the strike.

Proper lure control in cold water is also important. Most bass anglers are accustomed to fishing when the water temps range from 60 to 80F and the lure speed and action is based on those situations. In water 40F and below, more care has to be taken to slow everything down. The lure needs to sit longer but the slack needs to be out of the line so you can feel everything. So the first few times out, remind yourself to let it do just that. This type of lure control and patience comes with practice. Keep in mind that such a jig cannot be worked too slowly in the winter.

Leaving the jig lying in the zone increases the chance of a strike. Allow the bass time to find it and identify if it is food or debris. Keep a watchful eye on the line as cold hands do not always pick up that light winter tap. If you see your line twitch or start to move up, be ready to set the hook.

In trying to describe the feel of a winter bite, my friend coined it best. He calls it *mush-mouth*. Unlike a warm water strike that will often leave no room for doubt, the feel of a winter bass picking up the lure is very subtle and as you lift the rod tip to move the bait, it may feel “mushy” almost like the jig is dragging small debris. I’ve heard fishing partners say; “this feels odd” and I’ll yell back to them; “set the hook”. In the summer bass will inhale items with force, they can determine what items are food and quickly discard the items that are not. This action usually results in a sharp tap on your rod. If your reaction is slow, the result is usually a sing and a miss. In the winter this all slows down. The food is taken in slowly and with less force to transfer to the rod. At times, almost to the point where even the most sensitive rod can’t feel it. As you lift or drag the lure, all that might be felt is a little extra weight. When this happens, set the hook.

One of the most important pieces of gear for open water angling in the winter is a PFD. Put it on and leave it on. It will add an extra thermal layer and just may save your life. A comfortable PFD is a key element, especially in the winter.



Offerings such as hair jigs, tubes, finesse worms and grubs work well in the winter.