



Wading Small Streams for Smallmouth Bass

photos-Darl Black

by Marilyn Black

Why wade? There is nothing like feeling the tug of a frisky Smallmouth Bass on your line while you feel the flowing water in which the fish lives surging around your feet and legs. Catching fish is always fun, but the sense of interacting more directly with the waterway adds to your enjoyment and your connection with the aquatic habitat.

How do you wade and fish? Wade fishing is done thoroughly, slowly, cautiously, and with minimal gear. A



This Smallmouth Bass took a dinger stickworm, which imitated a crayfish like the one the bass swallowed earlier.

real plus of wading is that you can position yourself to take advantage of optimal casting angles, so you can repeatedly reach prime spots. Rarely should you cast directly downstream. Instead, cast upstream or across the flow, so the bait or lure is presented more naturally.

Do not hurry when you are wading. Walk slowly, being attentive to footing. Cast only after checking overhead clearances. Use your walking staff, which should include a loop around your wrist, to test the bottom materials and depth before each step.

My recommended list of “must have” wading equipment includes a 6- to 6½-foot medium-light spinning fishing rod spooled with 6-pound-test line, a floating walking staff, needle-nose pliers, clippers on a lanyard around the neck, an over-shoulder bag or fanny pack with a small assortment of lures and other terminal tackle, sunglasses, fishing license, and hat. You can go wet wading with water shoes, of course. In all but the hottest days, I prefer lightweight Gore-Tex chest waders with a padded wading belt at the waist.

Optional items that come in handy include a waterproof camera on a strap around your neck, a hand towel tucked into the front of chest waders, insect repellent, sunscreen, a moderate-size landing net on a strap over your shoulder, and if you are using live bait, a floating bait container on a rope, which is tied onto your belt.

Where to wade

The key is to select sections of creeks, tributaries, and shallow rivers with access to prime spots for Smallmouth Bass. Smallmouth Bass like flowing water with plenty of natural food and current-break areas. Fish the edges of eddies, the downstream side of fallen timber or beaver huts, heads of riffles, tailouts, rock-strewn shallows, and deeper washouts just behind bridge pilings. I prefer to wade on gravel, firm sand, or sections with small rocks. I avoid wading in mud or where aquatic weeds block my view. Watch out for slippery, moss-covered rocks.

In northwestern Pennsylvania, wading for bass is a popular activity on French Creek for its entire length, the free-flowing sections of the Allegheny River, Sugar Creek in Venango County, Conewango Creek, Brokenstraw Creek in Warren County, Oil Creek from Drake Well Museum downstream to Oil City, Tionesta Creek, Forest County, most of the Clarion River, and segments of Redbank Creek.



Releasing a Smallmouth Bass into the stream.



The author wet wading in the Allegheny River gets her first look at a nice Smallmouth Bass.

When to wade

Summer months are perfect for wading. Never wade in the dark. It is important to maintain your footing and balance yourself when casting or carrying your gear. The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's regulations allow fishing for Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass, and Spotted Bass in rivers and streams year-round, with catch and immediate release from mid-April to mid-June.

With what artificial tackle?

There are lots of choices, so just take a few of your favorite types packed into one container. Top picks by the anglers in my household are beetle spin lures, small topwater baits, 4-inch floating or suspending minnow plugs, small crankbaits, 3- to 4-inch stick worms rigged wacky style or Texas style on a single wide gap hook, and lead head jigs (sizes $\frac{1}{16}$, $\frac{1}{8}$, or $\frac{3}{16}$ -ounce) with either twister tails, crayfish-like, or tube plastic bodies. Most of these baits are cast upstream and fished downstream with the current.

Want to use live bait while wading

Rig live bait caught from the same stream you are fishing on a size #1 or #1/0 circle hook with a single splitshot. Do not use a bobber or float. Cast upstream and drift with the current.

Who can wade

Wade fish with a friend. You will get good exercise and share hours of fishing enjoyment as you explore Smallmouth Bass streams near your home or across Pennsylvania. ☐