

*Smallmouth Journal:*  
Soft Plastic for Winter  
Smallmouth in Northern Rivers

STORY & PHOTOS BY DARL BLACK



Over 60 years ago “rubber worms” made their appearance in the bass fishing scene. Then in the early 1970s, Mister Twister introduced the *curly tail grub*, which was followed by an abundance of soft plastic shapes and sizes from different companies. However, in those early days, discussion among anglers often centered on the theory that plastic baits became stiff in cold water therefore unattractive to fish. At the time, many fishermen believed pork bait trailers were a much better choice for coldwater angling.

While early plastic bait formulas were crude compared to today’s offering, I cannot recall seeing definitive proof that soft plastic caught fewer bass in cold water than pork trailers. But many anglers simply refused to use the new soft plastic baits once water temperature dropped into the 40s, switching back to pork. I suspect stiff-plastic-in-cold-water deal was a rumor started by several of the pork bait companies at the time!

Today, the serious river smallmouth bass angler relies heavily on soft plastic baits during the coldest part of the season. The following suggestions come from hardcore river rats I’ve fished with in recent years. While exact bait selections vary somewhat, all agree on three things when it comes to smallmouth fishing in cold water:

1. During cold water period in a northern river system, smallmouth seek out slack water eddies/holes or relate to large current-breaking objects on the bottom of larger pools (rock piles, debris piles of logs and branches, etc.).
2. The dominant wintertime forage for river smallmouth is crayfish.

3. Select a 2.5” to 3.5” crayfish-imitating bait and move the bait as little as possible along the bottom.

Pete Cartwright, creator of [www.smalliesontheyough.com](http://www.smalliesontheyough.com): “In really cold water, I like a Strike King Bitsy Tube in green pumpkin or other dark color. I fish it without adding any action, just letting the current move it along – although every now and then I’ll pop it with the rod tip. It is important to match the proper weight tube head to the current so the tube ticks bottom on a drift. I use this bait in the flat, slower water immediately above a deep hole. During the cold water period, smallies will hold in the deep hole, moving to the somewhat shallower water at the head of the hole to feed when conditions are right. If the fish are not up feeding, I’ll simply drop deeper into the hole with the same dead-drift presentation hoping to tease one of the non-active fish into biting.” ([stikeking.com](http://stikeking.com))

Dale Black, President of

Gamma Fishing Line: “My choice for larger smallmouth during the winter is a Booyah Baby Boo Jig with a Gene Larew Biffle Bug Jr. or Yum Crawbug. I usually go with a 3/16 ounce head, although I’ll increase to a 5/16 ounce head if wind and stronger than normal current prevent my bait from reaching the deeper parts of a wintering hole. In terms of colors, I’m partial to Peanut Butter & Jelly, because it has brown and purple in it. But any natural crawfish color will do. My presentation is, let the current do the work in carrying the bait downstream, attempting to keep the bait from settling into snags on the bottom by lifting or pulling the bait when I sense the bait rolling into a log or branch. In pools where the current is very, very slow, I will reel the jig slowly along the bottom, perpendicular to the current.” ([lurennet.com](http://lurennet.com); [genelarew.com](http://genelarew.com))

Gene Winger, recreational angler: “Being relatively new

to river smallmouth fishing, I do not have as many years of experience as some other fishermen. However, with some guidance from friends, I’ve discovered soft plastic creations from Winco Baits that have proven extremely effective in really cold water. The Chillie Williee is a 2-3/4 inch beaver tail bait, and the Willie Wannabee is a smaller version of the Chillie Williee with silicone whiskers. I’ll use the Chillie Williee with temperatures in the 40s, but once the temperature hits about 38 degrees and the bite gets really tough, I tie on the Willie Wannabee. I fish both as slow as possible with a lift-and-drop retrieve, incorporating long pauses so the bait sits stationary on the bottom with the current moving the whiskers. I fish both baits on a leader of 8 lb. Gamma Edge with 10 lb. braid backing. If the river is exceptionally clear, I drop to 6 lb. When I’ve discovered a group of smallies in deep water, I like



POPULAR WINTER BAITS, CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP: WINCO WILLIE WANNABEE; WINCO CHILLIE WILLEE; BERKLEY POWER BAIT MINNOW (FOR DROP-SHOTTING); CRUSHER DROP-SHOT TUBE; GENERIC CRAYFISH JIG TRAILER; BOOYAH BABY BOO JIG WITH YUM CRAW; GENE LAREW 2" SKIRTED DOUBLE TAIL; GET BIT BAIT CRAWLING TUBE; GET BIT BAIT TINY TUBE.

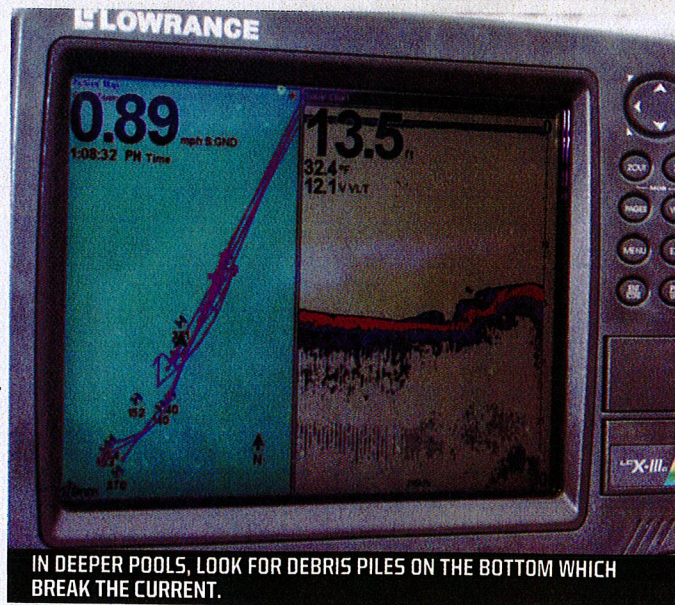




ON FREE-FLOWING RIVERS, LARGE DEEP POOLS USUALLY HOLD THE CONCENTRATIONS OF SMALLMOUTH BASS. HOWEVER, WINTERING SMALLMOUTH CAN BE FOUND IN HOLES AND EDDIES UP AND DOWN THE SHALLOWER STRETCHES OF THE RIVER AS WELL. DEPTH IS NOT THE PRIMARY CONCERN - BUT VERY SLOW FLOWING WATER OR SLACK WATER POCKETS WITH COVER ARE CRITICAL.

to fish the Willee Wannabee vertically, holding just off the bottom as I use the trolling motor to hover over the spot – difficult at times, but extremely effective.” (wincocustomlures.com)

Frank Malek, tournament angler: “Although I have traditionally used small 2.5” tubes on lightweight insert heads or a crawfish-imitating jig, more recently I’m relying on the drop-shotting technique, because I can keep the bait in one spot, right where the fish are holding. You can fish several hundred yards of a deep pool and never get a bite. But in cold water, when the bite comes it usually means there is a pile of smallies in a very small area. Vertical fishing with a drop-shot rig is the way to go; a 1/4 ounce or even 3/8 ounce elongated drop-shot weight allows me to stay in touch with the bottom while letting the bait flutter just above the debris. My favorite drop-shot bait is a 2.5” Crusher



Tube or small beaver-tail bug bait. However, some days the Jackall Cross-tail Shad or a large Berkley Gulp! Minnow will draw the bites from larger, aggressive bass.” (jackall-lures.com; cruncherbait.com)

Choosing a single soft plastic for cold water fishing is a daunting task. All the ones mentioned by

anglers above are excellent choices. But if limited to one, my pick would be the 2-3/4” Crawling Tube Bait from Get Bit Baits. This bite-size tube has silicone whiskers inserted throughout the length of its body. As a result, even when the bait is sitting on the bottom, the current moves the whiskers. I present the tube in the same

basic manner as anglers above fish their bait of choice. Cast it upstream at a 45 degree angle from the boat, let it find bottom, raise the rod tip and guide it along as it drifts downstream. In slower water, I slowly drag and lightly pop the bait. A hit may be indicated as a visible jump in the line, a definitive crack felt up the line, or simply a mushy pressure on the bait. Yes, you will be fooled sometimes by the mushy feeling; it might be a snag rather than a fish. However, if you lift gently on the line, you will generally get a head shake from a fish – then set the hook! (getbitbaits.com) ©

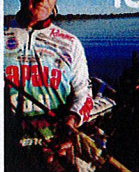

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Vol. 23 / Issue 4 / 2014-15

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