

OUTDOORS

Kovach's outings on Potomac keep anglers reeling

HARPERS FERRY, W. Va. — Every angler wants to fish where others haven't or can't.

That's why the business of packaging trips to remote corners of the world has expanded so much the past few years. To drop your lure in water where few others have a chance means excitement. There's the double excitement of offering fish something they often haven't seen and the possibility of taking a trophy.

If you enjoy smallmouth bass fishing, there's no need to fly off to Maine, Minnesota or Canada to get in on the action. Harpers Ferry is a good target. Mark Kovach's Potomac River Float-Fishing Trips successfully have been pleasing anglers from several states for five years.

"I've been lucky," Kovach said. "In that many of my customers keep coming back each season."

That's not luck; that's giving appreciated service. The good guides, who work hard, spend several years in the business before it begins paying off. But giving a full measure to each client results in their returning. It's no wonder that Mark gets repeats. His trips start at eight in the morning, and if the angler agrees, they end after dark under the Brunswick highway bridge spanning the Potomac River.

Last week, I fished with Kovach

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and an old friend, Ben Schley. Schley has been fishing the Potomac River for 50 years. He spent 29 years in Federal service related to fisheries. His job took him all over the world, and wherever he was, he brought along his fishing tackle. Ben settled in Shepherdstown, W. Va., along the banks of the Potomac River. Even though he is 70, he's tough and wiry and wades the river every chance he gets.

Ours began like all of Mark's trips. We met at River and Trails Outfitters in Knoxville, which is about 15 miles southwest of Frederick on State Route 340. Mark already had dropped his car off at Brunswick, and we were transported

to above Dam Number 3, 1½ miles upstream from Harpers Ferry.

The boat was waiting for us. But this is a very special boat. The water we were going to float is filled with rapids, and a conventional canoe or boat would have difficulty fishing through it. Except for those places where people can venture out into the river by wading, this stretch of the Potomac from our put-in spot to below the Weaverton Falls, 6 miles downstream, is some of the least fished waters on the river.

Mark had purchased a 14½-foot rubber raft and had constructed an interior platform that allowed us to sit on comfortable swivel seats as we progressed through Mad Dog rapids and other white water. The boat is so safe that we cast while Mark maneuvered the raft through water that would be very difficult to fish in any other kind of boat.

The scenery along the way is some of the most beautiful in this part of the country. High walls of the Blue Ridge mountains contain the river. We began on the Potomac, but more than a mile downstream at Harper's Ferry, the Shenandoah River joins it, swelling the Potomac to nearly twice its size and flow.

About 25 percent of Mark's customers are fly fishermen, and the rest use light spinning tackle. Mark

has back-up rods, in case you break one, and can offer you an assortment of lures. He also sells a special kit of flies deadly on smallmouth bass.

We drifted and anchored, catching bass with great frequency. I used both fly and spinning gear, but Ben stuck with a light trout fly rod outfit — a five-weight rod and line — and used either his own patterns or a small popping bug.

About noon, we stopped for one of Mark's famous shore lunches. It's a gourmet's feast. You also can keep cool during the day with chilled fruit juices and soft drinks Mark supplies from a huge cooler full of ice.

It was dark when we pulled up on the Brunswick public boat ramp under the bridge. Ben said, "I'd venture that we caught at least 20 legal bass today. How many did we get all together, Mark?"

Mark had a counter, and he checked it. "We caught 108 bass," he said. "Not bad."

Mark charges \$95 for each person and takes two anglers — or you can pay the full price and go by yourself. He requires a \$50 deposit to reserve a trip. The balance has to be paid one week before the trip. If you cancel, you either have to get someone to take your place or you forfeit the fee.

Mark also operates a highly successful fly fishing school, patterned after those developed by Doug Swisher. In the spring, the school is conducted near Thurmont. Later in the year, it's held in Harpers Ferry. It's a full-day school with plenty of classroom instructions, but all students end up on the water practicing what they've learned.

If you want to get in touch with him, his address and phone number are: Mark Kovach, 737 Thayer Avenue, Silver Spring, Md. 20910, 301-588-8742.