

Water muddy? Change on the fly

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SUN STAFF

Those of us who fly-fish the streams of the Mid-Atlantic are sick of all the rain that has been muddying our rivers and forcing the fish to hunker down.

Last year, I spent quite a few weekends flailing at the water with no success on the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers.

This year, I had the good fortune to learn from a fly-fishing guru that sometimes you have to put away your fly equipment if you want to catch fish.

Mark Kovach, who runs a fly-fishing school and guide service under his name, and I hit the Potomac River for a float from just above Dam No. 3 down to Brunswick about two weeks ago.

On the water, Kovach warned me that fly-fishing for the smallmouth might not be the order of the day.

"With all this silt in the water, if the fish are up in the water column, it's like being in a blizzard — they don't know where to go or what to do," said Kovach, in the 25th year of teaching his fly schools. "So they're going to be close to the bottom, and they're going to be tight to cover."

Because I seemed intent on practicing my fly-casting, Kovach decided to start the trip by going after a few carp that were cruising the shallows and eating cicadas under the overhanging limbs of the river's south bank.

I cast a cicada fly about 30 feet from the inflated raft that Kovach guides from. Though not the most accurate caster, I did get the fly close to a couple of carp searching for fluttering insects.

"Make sure you let him suck it down and he goes under before you try to set the hook," Kovach said.

All of a sudden, a big bruiser appeared under my cicada fly and opened his maw. As water flushed in, I saw my fly start its descent into his mouth.

Kovach's last admonition to me on what to do then flew out the window with my excitement. I promptly pulled the fly away as the carp slid backward, thinking it had captured the bug.

Then the carp disappeared.

With that loss, Kovach said we would return to fly if we saw a



Kovach, who runs a fly-fishing school, holds a 14-inch smallmouth bass caught on the Potomac River in Western Maryland.

No Thomson column

Outdoors columnist Candus Thomson is on assignment.

few more carp, but it was time to fish for smallmouth bass.

We switched to a spinning reel and rod, and Kovach tied a three-eighths-ounce safety pin spinner bait made by Big Mouth Lures with a mottled black and chartreuse skirt to my leader, which was attached to the Fireline on my reel spool. Kovach has equipment for any angler but encourages folks who regularly fish to enjoy their own equipment if they're used to it.

Like any couch potato who likes fishing shows, I've watched the big-time bass fishermen use safety pin-style spinner baits in action. But while I have a box of spinner baits at home, the fly-fishing bug bit me so hard shortly after I purchased them that I never used them.

Kovach considers the spinner baits and 3½-inch tubes on quarter-ounce jig heads, the "go-to" baits in this kind of heavy water. With the last two summers filled with rainy days, heavy, dingy water has required that he turn to spinning gear for business.

The watery summer of 2003 kept him and his guides off the river more than in any previous summer since the guide service began.

The strategy Kovach used was

to float the raft below ledges sticking out of the river and toss the spinner bait or tube lure in the slow water behind the rock. I would slow-roll the spinner bait, back to the boat, feeling every bump, thump and shimmy as I reeled in the lure.

The strikes were explosive. Six smallmouth bass, the largest being 14 inches, came to the boat.

Then, I was surprised to find another denizen of the river on the end of my line. Kovach said channel catfish seem to love the spinner baits, hitting them as you slow-roll them along a deep bank or behind the rocks. You can tell the channel cats from the bass, because they simply bulldog about the bottom — refusing to jump or come up.

Most of the channels I caught were between 16 and 18 inches. Four of the last five fish were channel catfish.

Even with a few breaks to sit on the shore, eat and chat, this was one of the fastest fishing days I've ever enjoyed on the water. The final count may have been 10, rather than in the hundreds when the water is low and the fly-fishing is good, but I suddenly had a new skill to practice in the high, dingy waters of the Mid-Atlantic.

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