

WHITE WATER BASSIN' ON THE POTOMAC

by Ken Penrod

This type of water is ideal for fly rod buffs.

It's hard to believe that our region can conjure up a thought about "white water" anything, let alone consider a fishing trip that combines white water and bass. When I think about white water, it usually draws mental reflections of places like the Snake River or the Teton. Terms are relative though, and believe it or not, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia have quality white water opportunities.

Some years ago, my wife Maggie and I went on one of those white water raft trips anticipating a vigorous and dangerous adventure. It started on the Shenandoah River and ended somewhere below Harpers Ferry. Maggie thought it was great, but to me it was a boring day. It had moments of excitement, brought on by well rehearsed preparations and suggestive dangers initiated by the tour guides. In fact, most of the trip was lazy floating, and an occasional water battle with other participants in rafts alongside. I looked at all the rocks and ledges as potential small-mouth hideouts, and wished I had brought along a spinning rod.

A few years ago, I met a guy named Mark Kovach at an outdoor show. Both being fishing guides, we offered to "swap" a trip, thus sharing each other's specialty. My company, Outdoor Life Unlimited, specializes in Potomac River smallmouth fishing, but the Kovach venture promised another latitude to our Potomac River experience. In the past 6 years, I doubt if any man has spent as many days on the river as I. Our guide service works the Potomac from Four Locks to Port Tobacco. The few areas in-between that we cannot get to because of water conditions include the Harpers Ferry sector and west. The water is just too quick and in some cases, too shallow for the conventional johnboat. Here, the white water raft is ideal.

Trouble with white water raft trips is that they are agonizingly uncomfortable. Sit on the bottom of the raft and get a wet, perhaps damaged, butt. Sit on the inflated sides and get a wet, perhaps damaged, everything. Those dumb little helmets don't keep the sun out of your eyes, and everyone wants to talk about idiotic subjects. A fishing trip on a raft needed innovation. Kovach did this with ima-



White water rafts converted into comfortable fishing craft, is trademark to guide Mark Kovach.

gination and ingenuity.

He starts with a 10 foot white water raft made from sturdy aluminum tubing. He then makes a platform that is attached to the top part of the raft walls. Three seats are affixed to the frame. The guide rows from the middle. An angler sits fore and aft of the guide. The oar locks are attached to aluminum shelves. Every bit of space is utilized. There are anchors in front and back and a heavy chain that may be dragged behind the boat, thus slowing the drift.

You can build your own raft. Kovach has a couple thousand dollars in his. Personally, I find it much more enjoyable and less expensive, to join Mark each year. Kovach can be reached at (301) 588-8742. There is a certain amount of danger on any water. The fast moving water of a free flowing river has its unique set of obstacles. For the most part, when the river levels are normal, it is simply a lazy scenic experience. The rule to remember here is: "when in doubt, get out."

When fishing a smallmouth river like those mentioned, some important considerations should be noted. Plan

on getting wet. That being so, the time of year is important. It is advisable to plan your trip when the water temperature is conducive to wet wading. Check with weather reports for potential winds and thunderstorms. Find out ahead of time if the river flow is safe. Take dry clothing to make the return trip more comfortable. Sunny skies make your day enjoyable, but that same sun can make your subsequent days miserable. Shorts and tee shirts seem to make sense, but it may be more sensible to take a light colored, long sleeved cotton shirt to protect from burn. Shorts under long pants, too. A waterproof sun screen solution and lip balm. A hat that can protect both head and ears. A towel to wet and place across neck and back. Sunglasses to ward off glare and protect against flying lures and hooks. A waterproof container to keep camera, wallet and maps in. A good comfortable life jacket. Plenty of low-sugar fluids to protect against dehydration. Someone should be told of your trip, including specific routes.

Fishing tackle can run the gamut, but an ideal setup would include the

following: Spinning tackle is best; a 5½ foot light or medium action rod and a high speed, rear drag spinning reel. We like 4, 6 or 8 pound test Stren line. Two rods are advised, as you can have different lures on each. This type water is ideal for fly rod buffs. Six to 8 weight rods of 8 to 9 feet in length. Line should match and weight forward or "bass bug" types are most suitable.

There is no need to take large boxes full of lures. Plan on probing the different depths, but remember that the depths are generally shallow. Plastic curly tail grubs could suffice alone. Lead head jigs of 1/16, 1/8, and 1/4 ounces with razor sharp hooks. Grub colors should include smoke, white and chartreuse.

We love top water lures. Our favorite is a white buzz bait. Rapalas, Tiny Torpedoes and popping lures do nicely. Crankbaits can often produce. Take shallow diving varieties like Cotton Cordell, Bill Norman and Rebel. The most reliable patterns seem to be crawfish and natural, but those fluorescent colors are excellent also. For flyrodding, cork and hair poppers and "wooly-buggers" do the job.

Some tools that will be invaluable include pointed nose pliers to quickly remove hooks from fish, fingernail clippers for snipping line, as knots should be retied often. A file or stone to keep hooks sharp. If you are to keep fish, a stringer is best here. Remember that a 12 inch smallmouth may be 6 years old and it is hoped that most would be released. We like to bend the barbs on our hooks over. Sure, you may lose some fish, but who cares! When handling smallmouth, try to keep from touching or grabbing the body. Insert the thumb into his mouth and quickly, but gently, release them.

When fishing this fast moving water, remember that you may only have one chance to cast to likely looking habitat. Accuracy is very important. The bass will generally be staged behind rocks, ledges, points and other water breaks. Like us, they would prefer to stay out of the fast current—but they realize that the current will provide them their food. Plan your casts either downstream, or perpendicular. Casting upstream invites snags, and it is often impossible, if not downright aggravating to attempt to go back for the lure. If you do get snagged, let a little slack in the line, then with your free hand, pull the line very tight and quickly let it snap back. This will often slingshot the lure free.

The white water bassin' trip that Kovach provides is among the most pleasant and satisfying we have ever enjoyed. If you get the chance, try it. Much of the information provided herein can be utilized on any small-mouth trip. We have abundant opportunities in our region to enjoy a myriad of angling adventures. This one will stand out in your memory for a long time to come.

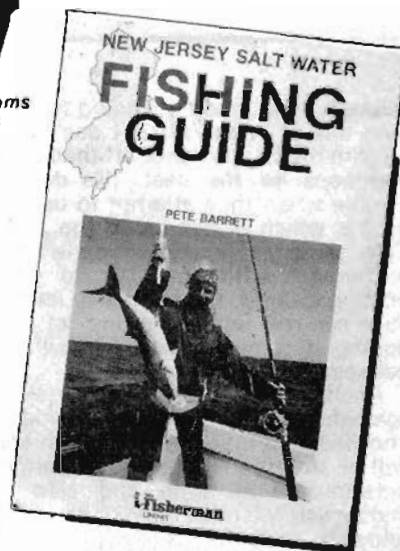
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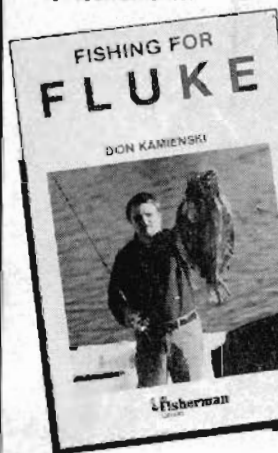
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