

OUTDOORS | Howell Raines

# Fishing Off a Raft In a Cool Potomac

WASHINGTON  
**W**HEN we lived in the Deep South, my sons and I never had a chance to fish in waters cool and fast enough to support smallmouth bass. Since we moved to Washington, these handsome, willing fish have become a favorite quarry. For the capital of our nation, as it happens, is surrounded by network of fine smallmouth rivers that, considering their nearness to a metropolitan area of 3 million people, receive remarkably little fishing pressure.

The best known is the Potomac. Although it passes through Washington at a sluggish, estuarial pace, the river in its upland stretches is a bold and varied stream. Coming down from Harpers Ferry, it offers the angler stair-step rapids, deep pools and long, glassy tongues of slick water. The only drawback is that the river bed, being pimpled with boulders and ridged with sharp outcroppings of slate, can be treacherous to wade. Drift fishing from a canoe is easier. But by far the finest fishing craft on the river is a big, doubled-oared rubber raft designed and run by Mark Kovach, a young teacher who guides in his spare time.

Mr. Kovach's price of \$190 a day for two fishermen may seem high for inland fishing for warm-water species. But his comfortable raft, his fishing expertise and his excellent selection of lures and tackle justify the price for the serious fisherman. Also, Mr. Kovach is a good historian, naturalist and conversationalist, and, rarest of all in a guide, he is as willing to learn as to teach. That became clear as he praised the skill of our fishing companion on a recent trip.

"It's nice to have a client who shows me a new technique," Mr. Kovach said as Brett Smith hooked one fish after another on his ultralight spinning rod. Mr. Smith, the 18-year-old son of a colleague of mine, had filled in for his father on the trip. Initially, the guide had been dubious about the young man's plan to drift unweighted plastic grubs through the rapids. Mr. Kovach preferred to fish the grubs with lead weights that made them cast quickly. But the leisurely drift of the unweighted grubs drove the fish mad. Sometimes we could see them competing for our lures. In midafternoon, Mr. Kovach announced that we had a chance to break his previous record of 142 fish for a single day's fishing on this stretch of the Potomac.

We wound up with 172, according to Mr. Kovach's hand clicker. The count would have gone higher had I not switched to a fly rod in late afternoon. The bass hit the streamer flies a little less readily, but leapt spectacularly when hooked. These are small fish, running ten to 12 inches for the most part. We kept 3 bass that went 13 to 14 inches as a concession

to my taste for their sweet, fine-grained flesh. Otherwise, this is catch-and-release fishing best enjoyed on very light tackle and with an eye to the beauties of the river.

A few miles below the confluence of the Potomac and the Shenandoah, for example, big mountain ridges end abruptly on each shore. The view, for the fisherman who glances over his shoulder to see the river sliding down toward him between two massive, blue-green pillows, is supernal. As for wildlife, we saw an osprey catch a bass larger than any of ours. We also saw mallards and wood ducks and a good flight of Canada Geese, hoisting themselves along with that unmistakable deep pumping of their wings. In the summer, on an earlier, less successful trip for smallmouth, my sons, Ben, 13, and Jeff, 11, and I saw a pair of Canadas and eight goslings. For adolescents and their parents, seeing a gosling is an instructive reminder that some species take time to achieve grace.

For many people, including me, fishing with one's children is among the strong pleasures of life, especially after they have learned to tie reliable clinch knots for themselves. Here, let it be noted that smallmouth bass are very congenial fish for children. When the summer fishing is at its best, they strike almost as readily as sunfish and make more romantic trophies by a mile. Mepps and Panther Martin spinners, small Rapala plugs and Beetle Spins are best for family fishing. This is because these lures are retrieved rapidly, so the hook-up is almost automatic. Plastic grubs required a delayed setting of the hook that is hard for children to master.

This summer, we used spinners exclusively on the Rapidan and Rappahannock Rivers, about 90 minutes from Washington. As good as the Potomac is, these Virginia streams surpass it for size, if not numbers of fish. Six-pounders are taken regularly, although anything over a pound is a good catch. Clore Brothers, a canoe livery near Fredericksburg, provides a shuttle and outfitting service for the two-day float trips that offer the best way to fish these rivers.

The scenery, however, is no match for the Potomac's. Also, at the junction of the Rapidan and Rappahannock, there is the problem of the man known locally as "the streaker." His specialty is dashing unclad through the popular campsites along the rivers. So far he has eluded capture by the law officers who occasionally try to nab him. When he is not actively streaking, he likes to pose *au naturel* atop boulders in midstream, at a safe, but highly visible remove from the passing canoeists and fishermen. "The streaker" has never been sighted with a fishing outfit, which seems an awful waste of all those hours on the water.