

Fishing Upper Potomac: Something to Get Hooked Doing

HARPER'S FERRY, W.Va., July 20 — The idea was to get to Mike Kovach's place around suppertime and mount a quick river assault. The smallmouth bass would be on the brink of their evening feed, a mythical daily eating orgy.

"See," said my fishing partner, Roughhouse, "every summer the white miller hatch starts around this time. These little white flies come off the river at dusk in clouds so thick you can't breathe. The bass go wild slurping them up. All you have to do is throw out something white. A Kleenex, a rag, a piece of cotton, anything with a hook in it. You catch 'em by the hundreds."

Inspirational message completed, he demanded a tall, cool greenie from the cooler and I handed over another icy Heineken's.

"Mike's place is right around here somewhere," he said, waving an arm toward a cliff overlooking the river.

Forty-five minutes and a few cool greenies later we found Kovach walking in circles around his green truck, which was parked in plain sight, right where he'd said it would be. "Follow me," he said, and roared off back down the hill.

Harper's Ferry is where the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers meet, 60 miles upstream from Washington. The historic little Civil War town, reconstructed with federal zil-

ions, lies in the rocky delta between the two rivers. Kovach, a professional smallmouth bass fishing guide, has a great fast-water stream on either side. Summer is his high season.

"The Shenandoah is still a little muddy," he said through an immense black handlebar mustache, "but the Potomac is clear. We'll fish that side."

"Are the white millers hatching?" Roughhouse asked.

"They should be by now but we haven't had anything yet."

So much for matching the hatch. There was no hatch. But Kovach had in his fishing pouch some other flies tied specially for this part of the world. He handed a fly box to me and the third member of our party, Jacksonville Rad. Roughhouse, a picture of erudition, hooked a plastic box of worms on his belt and shouldered a canvas bag full of tall cool greenies.

As the sun settled behind the railroad trestle that spans the river we slogged through tangles of poison ivy and briars to the banks of the wide Potomac, where smallmouth bass abound.

Kovach sent Roughhouse upstream, so if he was swept away by the current we'd have a chance to salvage the tall, cool greenies. Jacksonville Rad went downstream. Kovach

Angus Phillips

and I fished in the middle, the swift, cool water sweeping around our legs, draining off the day's heat.

Fifteen minutes, two bluegills and a couple of smallmouth taps later there was a great cry from upstream. Roughhouse appeared around the edge of an island with a huge orange fish. "I got one," he shouted over the rumble of the river.

"Come on down here," said Kovach. "We're gonna move to another spot."

Roughhouse looked confused but scrambled downstream to join us. "Why on earth do you want to move?" he said. "They're biting."

He hoisted his giant fish to prove the point. Kovach had diagnosed it from afar as a carp, but on closer inspection determined it was in fact a sucker.

"A sucker?" said Roughhouse. "In that case I'm going to turn it loose. I'm not taking home anything with a name like that."

About that time Jacksonville Rad grunted and we looked up to see him fast to a fish. His long fly rod described a perfect arch, framed against the greenery of shore, and the tip danced. From a whitewater riffle a

small bass erupted, performed a flip and fell back to the water. A minute later the fish was at hand, and Rad slipped the hook from its mouth and set it free.

"Getting late," said Kovach. "I want to take you to my favorite spot."

We hiked overland to the top of a long island. He said to fish the edge of the current, working downstream. If he had it timed right, we'd arrive at the bottom tip of the island just at nightfall. "There's a broad flat a foot or two deep there, and every evening the bass tear it up chasing after minnows."

Nightfall. A freight train rattles over the trestle and into the woods along the river edge. A cool breeze washes us, the water tugs and gurgles at our legs.

From the flats came splashes. "That's them," said Kovach. "They're in there after the minnows. Cast in there."

Rad pitched his fly, a weighted marabou minnow imitation, and stripped line back in with six-inch pulls. Fish on. I did the same and hooked a bass. Kovach set the hook on a third.

And so it went for the last 20 minutes of the day — a genuine feeding frenzy, with fish crashing the flies (Rad's, particularly) on practically every cast.

Roughhouse came trundling down just before pitch dark. He hiked out into the deepest place he could find, cast one time and commenced to shouting. "Big fish! Big fish!"

But the fish got off.

Then they all quit biting. Later, in the cinder parking lot by the railroad tracks, we relived the 20 minutes of mayhem and concocted visions of the mythical white miller hatch. Kovach said he'd call us when it happened.

Meantime, we agreed that about the only thing better than a tall cool greenie was fishing cool, fast water on a hot summer evening.

Good summer wading spots for smallmouth: The Potomac at Harper's Ferry; the Potomac at Violet's Lock 15 miles above Washington on the Maryland side; Goose Creek near Leesburg; the Monocacy east of Frederick, Md.; the Cacapon River near Capon Springs, W.Va.; South Fork of the Shenandoah near Luray; North Fork of the Shenandoah near Strasburg, Va.

Good lures: Mister Twisters, Mepps spinners, small rubber worms; small Big O diving plugs. Good bait: Worms, minnows. Good flies: Muddler minnows, marabou streamers.