

The Needles On The Potomac

By Tom Goodspeed

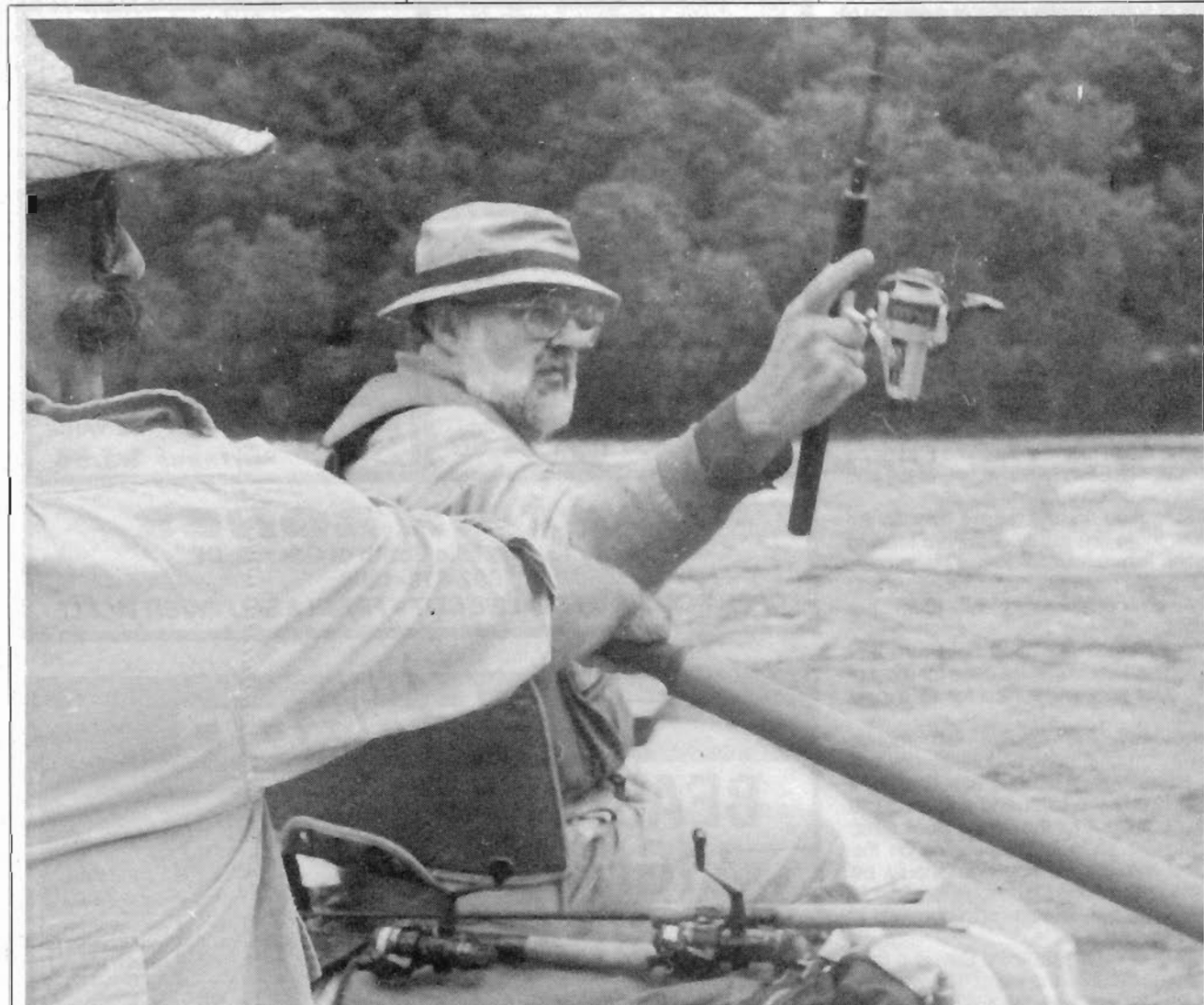
Just 40 miles or so up the Potomac River from the Watergate complex is the Needles, a fantastic white water stretch of smallmouth bass fishing below Dam #3. In this water, anglers wade during summertime low flows surrounded by fascinating boulders and ledges, while casting spinning or fly rods for bronzebacks. But the best way to enjoy this part of the Potomac is from the comfort of a rubber raft, preferably in the hands of

someone familiar with the run which leaves you free to enjoy the drift and to fish as you go.

A bit of a history lesson is necessary to best understand this water wonderland. Apparently, one of George Washington's early jobs was to work on the concept of a canal to parallel the Potomac because the river was not navigable above the District of Columbia due to frequent rock-strewn rapids. When the C&O Canal was

eventually built on the river's eastern shore, a number of river dams were constructed to provide the water flow for the canal and its locks.

Float And Cast. The railroad eventually displaced the canal, and the canal and dams fell into disrepair. Dam #3, just above the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers at Harpers Ferry, is a typical example. The western end of the dam has long been broken through, and



There is fine white water fishing to be had on the Potomac River. Guide Mark Kovach carefully pilots a rubber raft through the rapids while an angler casts to smallmouth bass.

below the break is a deeper channel, too deep and swift for wading, but ideal for float boating.

Mark Kovach, an old time character on the river today and fly fisherman and instructor from way back, conceived the idea of running a 12 hour, float fishing trip down the river, beginning just above Dam #3. His trips have since become an institution on the river.

The run weaves through the deeper

sections of the Needles, allowing anglers to cast to waters usually beyond the reach of waders. Below the Needles, rafts drift in the deeper waters below the sheer rock cliffs across from Harpers Ferry in the Blue Ridge Mountains, to enter Whitehorse Rapids, that productive flow above Weaverton. The journey concludes with a drift past Knoxville down to Brunswick where trucks meet the boats for the haul back to the cars.

The total water run is only about eight miles, but, with fishing, it is a full 12 hour day. Lefty Kreh, the wellknown Maryland fly caster, calls the water from Weaverton to Knoxville the most productive on the river, and it can be fished safely and productively only by boat.

Kovach's boat is a competition class inflatable, rigged specifically for this job. A rugged aluminum frame supports the oarlocks for the long oars he and his guides use to control the craft. Frequently they deliberately lodge the boat against a boulder, holding it there while the fishermen work the nearby waters.

The raft also brags three comfortable swivel seats and along the port side are unique rigs which store the fragile fly and spin rods when not in use. Crank-up mushroom anchors are available when needed.

Mark Kovach and his staff of river runners are all able fishermen, experienced in both fly and spin casting. A good number of Kovach's fly fishing school students end up making the trip down the Potomac and when the white miller hatch is blossoming in late summer, float fishing reservations are difficult to obtain.

An ultralight spinning rod loaded with 4 or 6 pound test mono is probably the most popular rig on the river, a good selection when the waters are low and clear in late summer. Stuff your pockets with some white, chartreuse and black 1½ inch and 3-inch Mister Twister grubs and some 1/8 ounce lead heads and you're in business. Sure, you'll lose a lot to the bottom but the lures are inexpensive and they definitely catch fish.

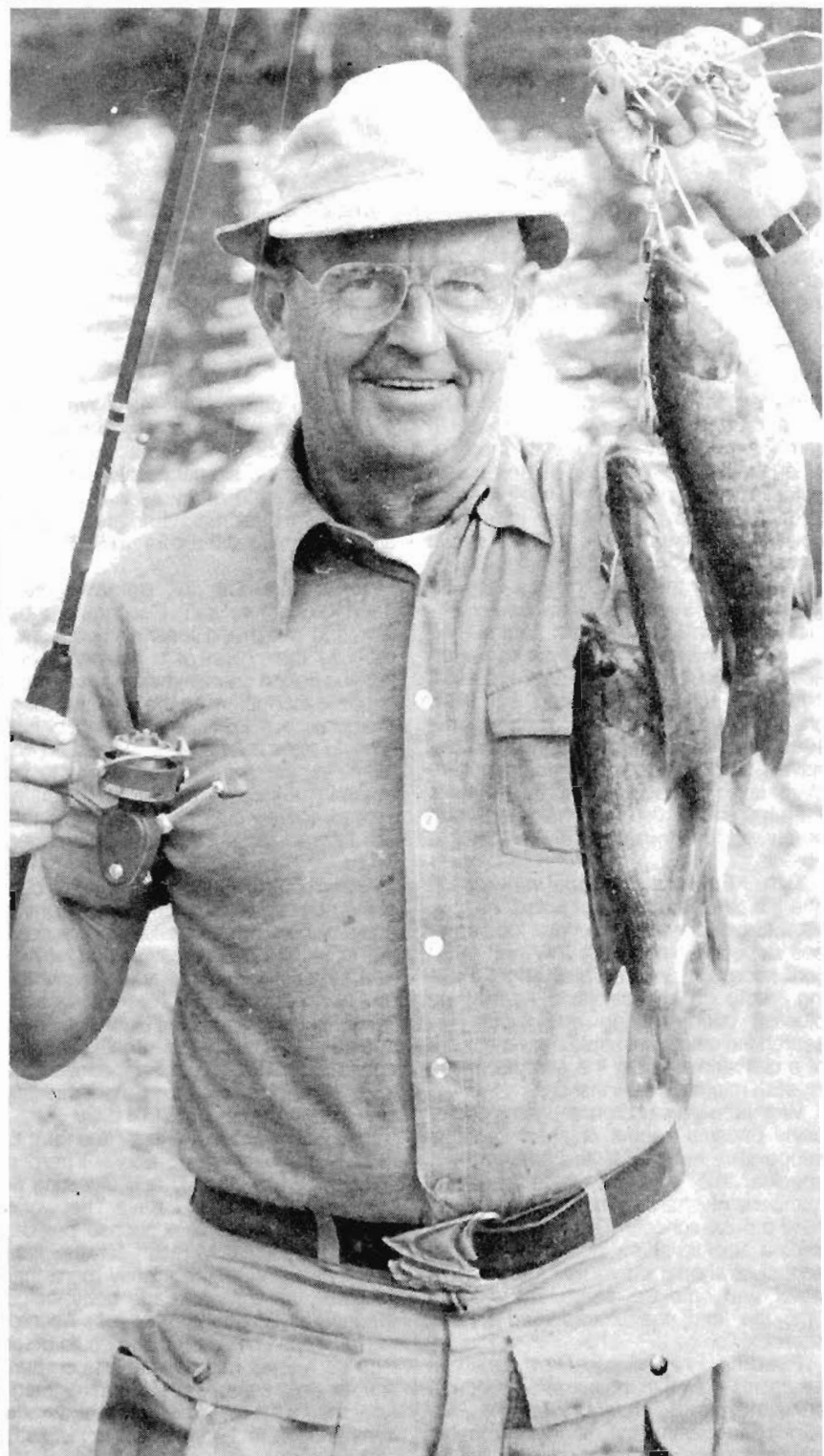
More Than Bass. Besides the smallmouth which commonly run from 9 to 14 inches (with an occasional 3 or 4 pounder thrown in), you'll also catch rock bass which are also known as red eyes locally. These small bass take lures well and offer a lot of fun. Additionally, red breasted sunfish come heavy in the Potomac and you'll enjoy hooking them on light tackle.

A lucky catch on a grub is a walleye. Walleyes have been stocked periodically and while not thick, some have grown nicely. I've also caught lunker carp when bass fishing these waters. I've had them hit crankbaits as well as twister tails and that can be a 15 or 20 pound shocker!

To reach this water from Baltimore, take Route 40 west to Frederick and then west on Route 340 to the river. Kovach begins his trips at the River and Trail Outfitters headquarters in Knoxville on Route 67, where the cars are parked.

Waders approach the river through Sandy Hook. Here, if you drive up River Road to Goodharts Lock, just above Hoffmaster Road, you can park and walk upstream along the old C&O Canal tow path to as far as Dam #3, a mile or so upriver. The odds are you'll be so tempted to fish that you'll never reach the dam!

A good boat ramp is at Brunswick, below the Route 287 Bridge, and from here you can boat upstream to the lower end of the Needles. Just be sure your outboard is equipped with a pitchfork propeller guard or you'll probably end up buying a new lower unit upon returning home. An added advantage in running upstream initially is that in the event of motor failure, you can always drift fish back to your car.



The author displays a stringer of typical Potomac River smallmouth bass. Rock bass, walleye and big sunfish are also caught during float trips on The Needles.