

Float Trip On The Potomac

You can catch more than 50 smallmouth bass a day.

By Ed Russell

The Potomac River is regarded by many as one of the finest smallmouth rivers in the East. Its shallow, rocky runs and deep pools offer precisely the types of cover smallmouth bass need at different times of the year. The Potomac offers numerous opportunities for an angler to try his luck. The number of fish that inhabit this river is amazing and that added to the scenery and abundance of wildlife make a day on the Potomac one of the most enjoyable an angler could imagine.

Float To Fish. One of the difficulties encountered, however, is gaining access. Much of the land on both sides is privately owned, and getting permission to cross is not always easy. Although there are a number of spots which have public access and good fishing, these areas are frequently crowded. A good road map will point out the areas of easiest access, and an angler wishing to "wet his feet" for the first time could well try any of these spots. A better approach, especially for a newcomer, is a guided float trip on the river. This is certainly one of the most efficient ways to fish, allowing an angler to reach areas which see far fewer fishermen.

An additional benefit of utilizing a competent guide is that he will usually have a good knowledge of the lore of this river. The geological formations he will point out as well as his relation of historical events which have occurred along the way add greatly to the day's enjoyment.

One guide who not only knows "his" section of the Potomac intimately, but is also extremely well-versed in its history is Mark Kovach.

An All-Day Affair. Mark meets his



A typical Potomac River float trip consists of anglers fishing from the front and back of a rubber raft, with the guide rowing in the middle. At times, the anglers also get out and wade.

clients at 8 a.m. and will fish (if the client desires) until dark. His float trip begins just above dam #3 and ends at the town of Brunswick, a district of about eight miles. The float passes through two significant rapids — The Needles above Harpers Ferry, and Whitehorse rapids below. In early spring, because of high waters, these rapids can be dangerous for the inexperienced. Later in the year, a time when most fishermen would be interested in making the float, the water level is down considerably, and the rapids are of little concern, especially when negotiated with the rubber raft. Nonetheless, it is a state law that all boaters in this section of the Potomac wear an approved life vest.

During the float, there will be a stop for a light lunch, usually consisting of fruits, cheeses and fresh bread. Later, there will be a supper stop, with lunch meats and fresh rolls and salad. Mark supplies all food and beverages and does not stint on either the quality or the quantity.

Mark uses specially-modified 14½-foot

inflatable rubber rafts to negotiate the part of the river he fishes. These rafts accommodate two anglers fishing from a front and rear seat, with the guide rowing from a welded aluminum platform in the center. The rafts are exceptionally stable and easy to fish from, and have a very shallow draft. They can easily negotiate the numerous shallow areas which will be encountered. They are also very tough. Considering the enormous number of sharp rocks and the rapids which will be navigated, this is a very desirable feature.

Plenty Of Action. The type of fishing is up to the client, and fly, spin and casting tackle all work well. Although surface strikes are the most exciting, and sometimes, especially during heavy insect emergence, quite effective, you will usually catch far more smallmouth on subsurface offerings. The exception to this is in late July when a white mayfly, locally called the White Miller, hatches in enormous numbers. Toward dark, when the "Miller Hatch" is on, just about every

fish in the Potomac keys on them, and any white fly of a size 10 to 12 will produce. You won't necessarily catch just smallmouth either since even catfish feed on the "Millers."

The number of fish that can be caught during a day's fishing is astonishingly high. It is not at all unusual to hook over 50 fish a day per person. Mark claims that the most ever hooked was by a father and son combination — competent anglers who hit everything right. They hooked approximately 300 fish between them.

This past July three friends and I took this float. The day was blistering hot with temperatures approaching 100 degrees with humidity to match — not exactly ideal conditions. The river was also extremely clear, further complicating matters. Nevertheless, when the day ended we had tallied 197 smallmouth bass, all of which were released. It is important to note that while the state regulations allow keeping five smallmouth bass per day after June 15, this section of the Potomac has been designated trophy water and is subject to a slot limit. Bass may not be kept between 11 and 15 inches, and only one per day may exceed 15 inches. Also, if you fish with Kovach, he strongly suggests a self-imposed limit of zero. Mark feels catch and release is as important to the future of quality bass fishing as it is for trout.

Our group alternated between fly fishing and spinning. Woolybuggers in olive, brown and chartreuse were the best fly used, and small salt-impregnated grubs in brilliant blue produced best on spinning tackle. This was the first time I had tried these "salty" lures and I was surprised to discover that the bass literally tried to eat them. If there is any criticism of this type of lure it would be that they resulted in some deeply hooked fish — not too conducive to catch and release.

A fairly new surface lure, the Fin Ess, surprised all of us with its effectiveness. It is a soft plastic, minnow-shaped lure with



Tackle Tips

Spinning Rod:

Ultralight or lightweight, 5 to 6 feet

Line:

4 to 6-pound-test monofilament

Effective Lures:

Small, blue, salt-impregnated grubs

Fly Rod:

8½ to 9½ feet of 7 weight

Line:

Weight-forward floating line, or a sink tip for bigger bass in deeper holes

Effective Flies:

Olive, brown, chartreuse Woolybuggers, or white fly during July's White Miller Hatch

no apparent built-in action. An erratic retrieve, however, caused this lure to dart and dive just like an injured minnow. This action proved to be irresistible to the smallmouth. In the clear water, we could see bass come from quite a distance to hit this lure.

Get Your Feet Wet. Most of the fishing was done from the boat while the guide held it in place allowing several casts to each choice spot. In the shallower spots, we were offered the opportunity to wade and fish. For many anglers, myself included, this is the most enjoyable way to fish. Often, it is also the most effective way to cover the water. You should be aware, however, of the slippery, sometimes sharp rocks which abound. Felt-soled wading shoes are a must. An even better choice would be spiked sandals such as "Corkers," but obviously, these would not play well in a rubber raft. Should you choose to use these, you would have to put them on after leaving

the boat, and remove them before re-entering. Do not think that you can get away with sneakers. Since water is a natural lubricant for rubber, any rubber-soled shoe or boot is an invitation to a broken ankle in this river.

The best time to float the Potomac depends on what type of fishing interests you most. Spring and fall are the times for the largest fish. Summer is when you will catch the most. As mentioned earlier, the river teems with fish, but the downside of this is that you will hook many small bass for every good one. No matter, river smallmouth being the battlers that they are, even a small one puts up a surprisingly strong fight.

Equipment and clothing needed for this trip vary with the time of year. An 8½ to 9½-foot fly rod of 7 weight is ideal. Because most of the fishable areas are shallow, a weight-forward floating line is the best choice. If you want to fish the deeper holes for larger fish, a sink tip or even a sinking head may be called for. A lightweight or ultralight spinning rod of 5 to 6 feet in length is perfect. Four or 6-pound monofilament line is the best choice.

Clothing will obviously vary with the time of year. If it is cool enough for waders, neoprenes are recommended. You can get in and out of the boat more easily with these than with those made of other materials. Summertime, a pair of old pants and a pair of felt-soled wading shoes will be most comfortable.

A float trip of this type is one of the most enjoyable ways to fish. The guide does all the work and you simply have a good time. Even the cost is not unreasonable. Kovach charges \$100 per angler. Considering that the day begins at 8 in the morning and usually lasts till dark, and includes lunch, dinner and all beverages, this is a bargain.

If you are interested in this activity, you can contact Mark at 737 Thayer Avenue, Silver Spring, MD 21793. Or call him at (301) 588-8742.