

# Two Rivers, Two Guides and Smallmouth Bass

by Charlie Most

As we launched the raft into the Potomac just above Harpers Ferry, I could hear the muffled roar of rapids downstream. That sound has always been a real grabber for me as it seems to say adventure, or maybe excitement, or best of all, good fishing.

And I found all three — adventure, excitement, and good fishing — with two different guides on two nearby rivers that are literally teeming with smallmouth bass.

I've had a long but often interrupted association with smallmouth bass over the years and they rate right at the top among my favorite fish. That association really jump-started when I moved to this area in the late 50s and discovered the upper Potomac.

In his 1881 *Book of the Black Bass*, Dr. James Henshall described smallmouth bass as "inch for inch and pound for pound, the gamest fish that swims." That's an arguable point, yet few fish come close to smallmouth bass in their willingness to strike a variety of artificial lures, give you a fight out of all proportion to their size, and do all this against a scenic background of clear, swift-flowing, and rock-strewn rivers.

Moving here from the high-up West where trout fishing was the thing, I ignorantly believed I was coming to a rather fishless part of the country. But within a year I had floated the Potomac above the Shephardstown, WV, bridge and caught smallmouth bass. And since then, I've explored the Potomac from Paw Paw Bends to the Seneca Breaks, and both forks of the Shenandoah, plus the Rappahannock and anything else that looked like smallmouth water.

But I had missed one section of the Potomac, from Dam No. 3 above Harpers Ferry down to Brunswick, Maryland. Much of this water is treacherous to wade, and the Class III rapids seemed a bit much for my limited white water skills. The river is wide here, only narrowing at the rapids where it breaks through the hills just above and again below Harpers Ferry.

To fish it right, you need to be in a raft with someone knowledgeable at the oars. In my case, that someone was Jeff Kelble who guides for Mark Kovach Fishing Services. Kovach's float fishing operation has been an institution in this area for more than 20 years, and his guides specialize in this section of the Potomac.

Somehow I had never gotten together with Mark for a trip through this area but while talking with him at his booth during the big sport show in Chantilly, he said he was going to work me in on a trip this spring.

So, on May 24, I drove early morning backroads from west of Leesburg north to U.S. 340 to meet Mark and Jeff at Lee Baihly's River and Trail Outfitters at the Maryland end of the U.S. 340 bridge. Shortly after 9 a.m., we were on the water and fishing.

Just below the remnants of old Dam No. 3 are some great looking slicks that just spelled smallmouth and Jeff positioned the raft to give me the best

chances at those spots. This was a show-me type trip for Jeff. He has guided for Mark for some time now and knows how to handle the raft in the heavy breaks and how to position a fisherman to not only cast to the target area but also to fish out the cast most effectively. But Mark wanted to show him some favorite smallmouth hotspots and especially the best routes to take through those "rock garden" rapids during low-water periods.

It was a day of distant, roaming thunderstorms, overcast skies and, below Harpers Ferry, considerable upstream wind, but the fishing was good. I caught a number of feisty smallmouth and lots of red-breasted sunfish that fought hard in the heavy current.

At one point, Jeff pulled the raft up against some rocks so he and Mark could wade, and then Jeff noticed literally swarms of tiny "black" fish hanging just below some dense weedbeds. He thought they might be smallmouth bass fry but they were too hard to catch by hand. I had an aquarium net in a boat bag and he caught one with it. It was no more than half an inch long and there had to be thousands of them in those weedbeds. I photographed it and then let it swim back to its brethren.

Mark's guides use 14½-foot rubber rafts designed and customized for fishing. They are also very comfortable with swivel seats and backrests and plenty of room for gear. Clients use the front and rear seats for fishing and the guide has the center seat where he handles the 10-foot oars to hold the boat in position. There are anchor winches both fore and aft and a drag chain winch to slow the raft down if needed.

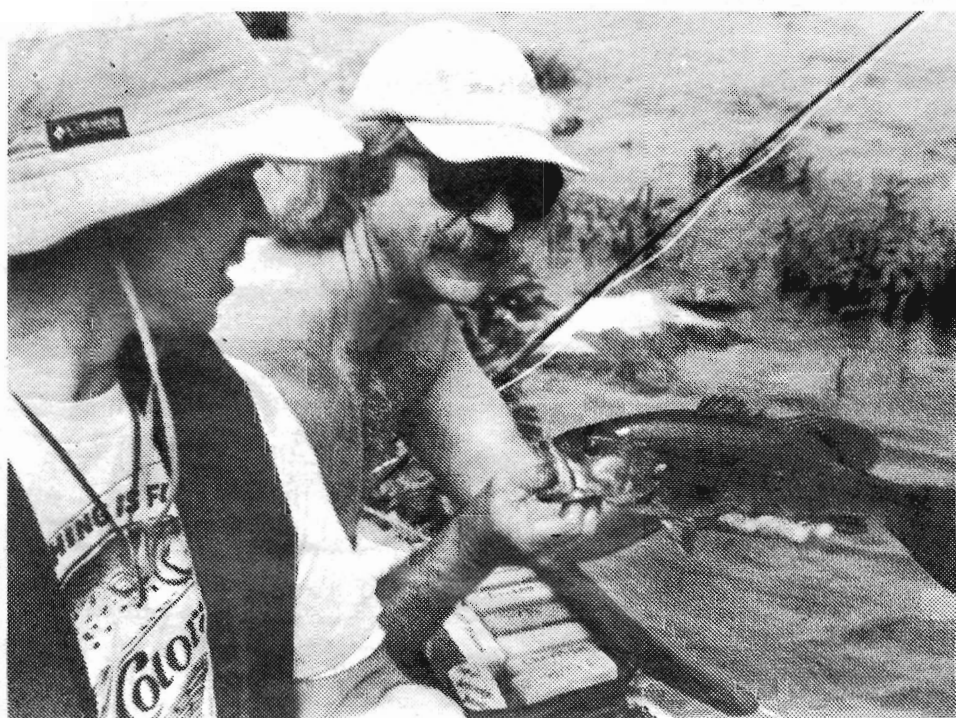
Mark caught two good-sized smallmouth and diplomatically suggested that my flies might not be getting deep enough for the bigger fish. He took one of his fish on a big Orvis spey rod as he wanted to learn more about using this somewhat specialized tackle. His other, bigger fish was taken on a spinnerbait lure on spinning gear. He had extra spinning outfits and I used one a short time but casting that fine fly rod kept bringing me back to it.

We were on the river until almost 9 p.m., landing under the river bridge at Brunswick, MD. Mark's trips include a full day of instruction and fishing, wide selection of flies and lures, history, geology, and river lore, plus lunch, snacks, and beverages.

Jeff, 28 and a graduate of Tufts University in Boston, is also a good cook, serving a special Mexican-flavored dip to tide us over until lunch, and then a unique, tasty salad followed by shish-kabobs cooked over a charcoal fire on the riverbank. Tough life!

Mark's trips include the section I floated, a portion of the West Virginia stretch of the lower Shenandoah, and the Susquehanna River in the Harrisburg, PA area. Potomac and Shenandoah trips run \$350 a day for two anglers, with the Susquehanna costing \$400. Mark's operation can be reached at 301/588-8742 in Silver Spring, MD.

As if that full day on the Potomac



**Mark Kovach, longtime guide and guide service operator on the upper Potomac, hefts a nice smallmouth as guide Jeff Kelble looks on.**

wasn't enough, the following week I went out with another guide to fish the delightful little North Fork of the Shenandoah River. I had also run into Lou Giusto, of Bronze Back Fishing Guides, at the same Chantilly show where I talked to Mark Kovach.

Lou and his son had taken my fly tying class some years ago, and he told me about his guiding operation. Before our visit ended, he invited me over to fish with him.

Lou lives near Woodstock, VA, and I drove over after Memorial Day. Imagine my surprise as I parked when David Hart, good friend and outdoor writer for the Journal papers, came over to me. He and Darren Brown, an outdoor book editor from Bozeman, MT, who was visiting relatives in the Winchester area, were going to join Lou and me for a canoe trip down a four-mile stretch of the North Fork.

We launched the canoes at a low-water bridge below Woodstock and floated through a wilder section of the North Fork than I knew existed. Part of this was due to the floods that swept that area in 1996 as entire trees with root wads projecting high above the water were in the river. These provide great smallmouth hangouts.

Lou only fishes the North Fork early in the season before aquatic plants become too dense. In summer, massive growths of water plants almost choke the river and make the fishing too difficult. Chemical fertilizers from surrounding farms may cause this.

Yet all of this vegetation also may well create better habitat for the fish, because in my experience and that of many others, this small river produces bigger smallmouth than the larger South Fork. I've seen fish up to four pounds come out of the North Fork and Lou Giusto has taken smallmouth from it that exceed five pounds.

There had been recent rains in the North Fork drainage and the water temperature was in the mid-60s, a cold change from when friends of mine fished there the week before. It was enough temperature drop to make wet wading uncomfortable.

That kept me in the canoe most of the time but I didn't mind a bit. Lou handled the canoe beautifully and had me spotting casts where the current swept right along the shore back under overhanging

branches. It was bright enough for this to work since the fish had a current to deliver food to them without too much brightness. But Lou made a valid point that all river smallmouth anglers should keep in mind. Fish may be anywhere in the river and too many anglers bypass good holding areas out away from the banks.

But the colder water seemed to have put the bass off their feed. I did land a few, and plenty of big red-breasted sunfish.

We pulled into the takeout site after floating about four miles of stream. David and his friend had to leave but Lou wanted me to get a picture of a nice fish so we headed upstream to a good wading spot. I again couldn't catch anything sizeable there but Lou hooked two nice fish and I photographed him landing one of them.

Lou Giusto conducts float fishing trips that reach the more remote stretches of the North and South Forks of the Shenandoah, using a stable canoe on the North Fork and a large raft on the South Fork. He started Bronze Back Fishing Guides and began full time guiding in 1996 but last year's drought almost killed the business. However, former clients kept calling so he cranked the business up again.

Lou has an Education degree from the University of Delaware but went into the restaurant business after school, managing dining rooms for fine restaurants in Dover and in northern Virginia, and also becoming a gourmet cook along the way. He moved to the Shenandoah Valley six years ago.

Lou, who teaches and coaches at Woodstock's Central High, is available seven days a week until school starts. He charges \$250 a trip for two clients, including lunch and beverage, and is one of the few float trip operators who will also take solo anglers, at \$150. Bronze Back Fishing Guides can be reached at 540-459-8818.

It's difficult to find the time to really get to know a river and its fish. I like to think I do a credible job on most rivers for most fish species. But there is no substitute for going out with someone who fishes a river on a day-to-day basis, learning its moods and the ways of its fish. Mark Kovach's guides do that on the rivers they regularly work and so does Lou Giusto on both forks of the Shenandoah.