

# Structure Fishing Flowing Water

**By Mark Kovach**

**"In flowing water, smallmouth are going to be where the most amount of food goes by and where the least amount of effort is required to stay there."**

Structure and habitat are two well used words among veteran anglers. They are topics that should be in the minds of all anglers when approaching a body of water. For understanding where a fish is most likely to be found is the first step in deciding where you are going to cast a fly, lure, or bait. Even a lure that is working for a friend fishing nearby will result in a low success rate for you if thrown to spots not likely to be frequented by fish.

In flowing water, smallmouth are

going to be where the most amount of food goes by and where the least amount of effort is required to stay there. Most spots in a river with fast moving current lanes near slow water areas will hold fish. River fish take up residence in holding spots near flowing food lanes. They wait on the current's edge for food to be carried down to them. When they see something that looks appetizing they move out and grab it - very much the way you would while walking down a cafeteria line. Be-

ing able to identify these locations is the key to unlocking the door to successful river and stream fishing.

A river's rocks, ledges, holes, and rubble all contribute to its structure. River structure can be natural or man-made and it can be located above or below the surface. The objects in and along the river's bed cause currents to change speed and direction as water flows around, over, and beneath them. Fish will inhabit structures that provide food, comfort, and protection. Your targets for successful angling are those structures that create splits and pockets in the current.

Rocks in flowing water are obvious spots. Fish hide behind the rocks which block the current. There they fin comfortably while keeping a watchful eye on the fast food lane. If an insect, minnow, or crayfish floats or swims by, the fish will charge into the current, pick it up and return to the comfort of the holding spot.

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## PRESENTATION—Illustration #1

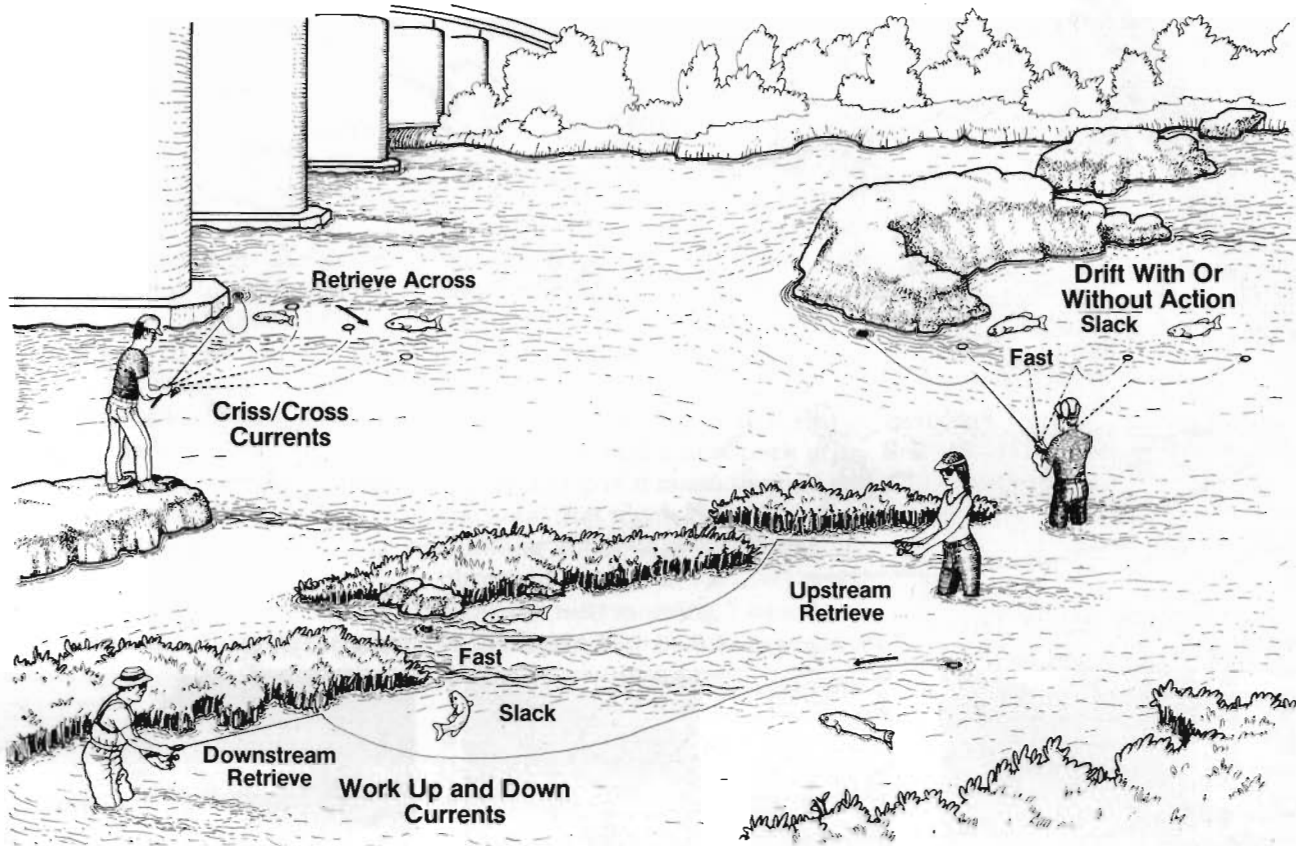


Illustration #1

### Methods of Presentation

But once you've found a potential holding spot, how do you deliver your fly, lure, or bait to insure success? Some variation of the following general presentations should work in most water:

**Drift With or Without Action** - Present your offering so it floats along the current's edges. Either a drag-free float may be used or one with twitches and pulsations to add some life.

**Criss-Cross Currents** - Work your offering by throwing it into the slow current and moving to the fast current or by casting to the fast lane and running to the slow. A variation in retrieve speeds should be tried as well at different locations along the split.

**Work Up and Down Currents** - Work your lure up and down the merge line of the currents, in either the fast or slow lanes. Stop your retrieve and allow the lure to hold and work in the current. Also try twitching and jigging it.

Illustration #2

### Pockets behind Structure Surface

The easiest to identify of all struc-

ture is that which is above surface. The rock example used earlier is a prime spot. Other good locations are shown in Illustration 2.

**A. Slack Water Tongues** - Two currents are merging below the island, grass patch, and bridge pier shown in Figures A-1, A-2, A-3, and Photos A-1 and A-3. Good holding spots run along the edges of the slackwater pockets which extend downstream of these obstructions. Drifting an offering along the tongue's edges or criss-crossing the current split can both be effective presentations.

**B. Edges of Chutes** - As water rushes through openings in ledges and rock croppings, current chutes are formed. Slack water areas occur next to the head and along the sides of these chutes as shown in Figure and Photo B. Throwing the head of the chute and allowing your offering to drift downstream may bring someone up from the bottom or in from the side. Criss-crossing the current split in several locations as well as working the chutes tail may earn you a few strikes. And pulsating a streamer while working it back up stream may be too much to resist for the most reluctant of fish.

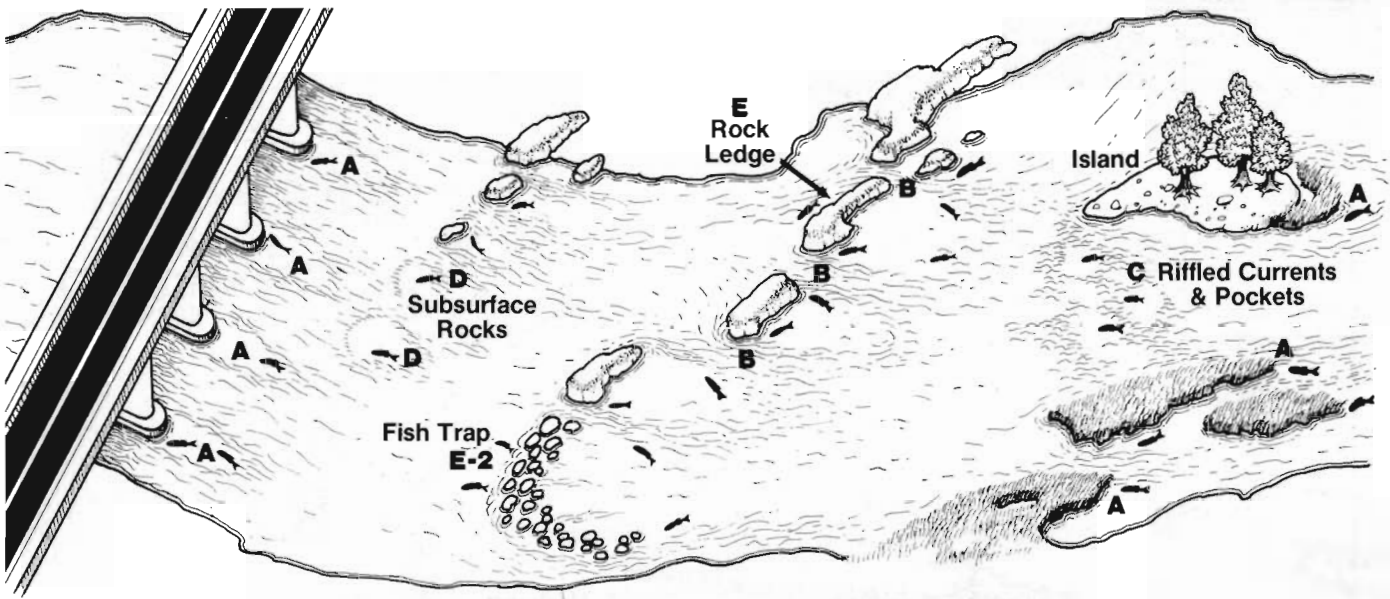
### Sub-Surface

Identifying current patterns caused by underwater structures is a little more subtle. Here the objects in the river are not sticking up and easy to see. Their positions under the water forces the currents to distort or split and change speeds.

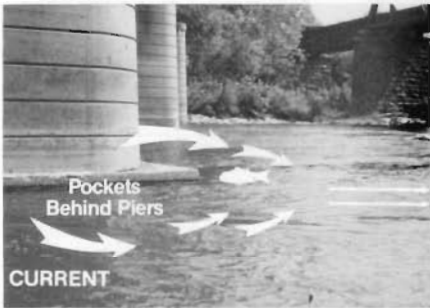
**C. Riffled Currents and Pockets** - These develop in fast flowing water areas as water runs around one obstruction after another as shown in Figure and Photo C. Interlacing through these currents are slack water pockets. Fish find these pockets to be easy holding spots amongst the concentrated fast food lanes. Criss-crossing the current splits is one of the most effective presentations for this structure situation.

**D. Current Slicks and Riffles** - A large slick develops on the surface of a river when the majority of water is flowing at a steady pace. Surface disturbances as shown in Figure and Photo D are created when water speeds up to move around a submerged rock, sunken log, or other obstruction. Drifting something in along side of the riffled area or casting above and criss-

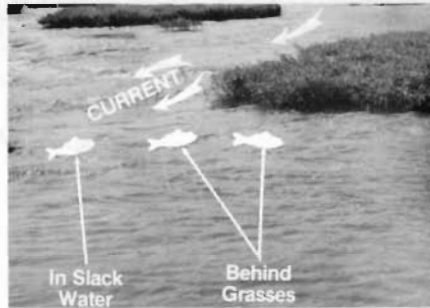
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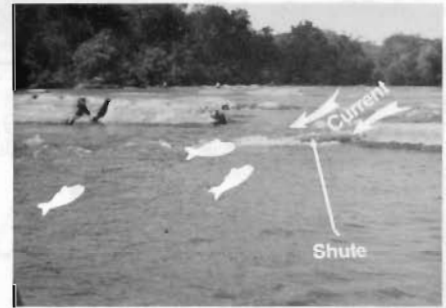
Photograph A-1



Photograph A-3



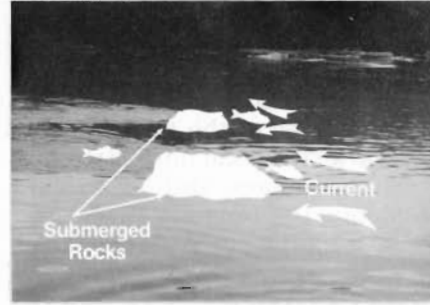
Photograph B



Photograph C



Photograph D



Photograph E-1



Photograph E-2



crossing below the disturbance should bring out a fish to take a close look. You should be cautious however, not to place a cast right at the beginning of the riffles. Chances of hanging-up on the responsible obstruction are pretty high.

**E. Slack Water in Front of Structure - Surface and Sub-Surface -**

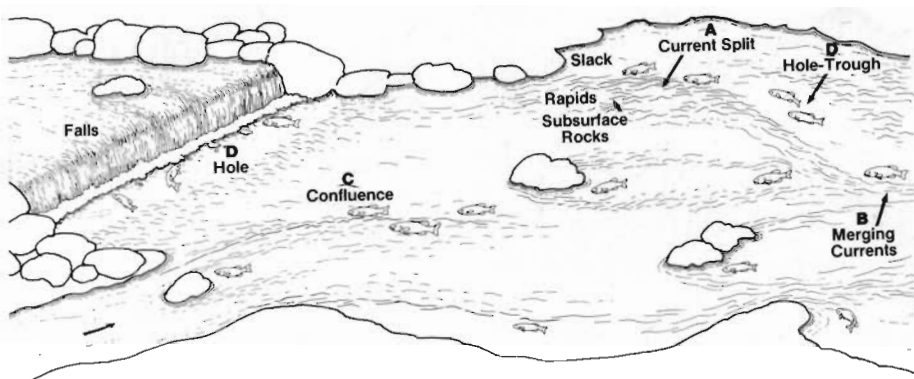
As water flows up to a large surface area such as a ledge, island, or pile of rocks, it hits the obstruction, momentarily stopping, and then deflects and flows off to the side or over it. This type of flow creates a slack water area in front of the object. Fish will frequently hold below the surface in this "bow wave" waiting for food to wash in to them. Figure and Photo E-1 shows a ledge face. As you approach the ledge, 3 to 4 casts should be made paralleling the front of the ledge in order to swim your lure past everybody's nose. The first should be about 15 feet above and the following consecutively closer. If a parallel presentation is not possible, then a

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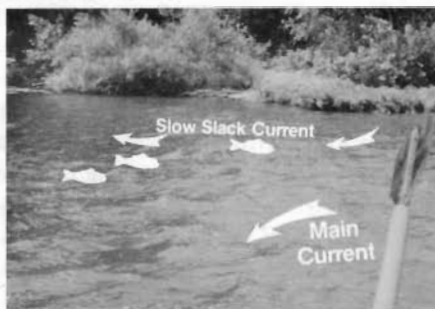


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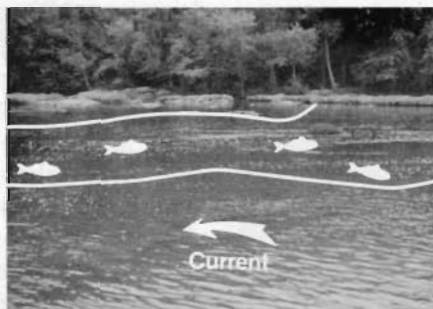
### SPLIT and MERGING CURRENTS—Illustration #3



Photograph A



Photograph B



Photograph D-1



toss down within a foot or two or the structure should be made working your offering back towards you. A drift into the ledge could also be made.

A subsurface version of the ledge is shown in Illustration and Photo E-2. Here the structure still causes a slack water back-up before the water flow runs over or around it. The same presentation strategies should be used. E-2 also shows another variation on our theme, an

old Indian fish trap. Indians carried rocks out into rivers to construct a diversion dam that would direct flow into a trap. The upstream side of this structure all the way down to its chute can hold many fish.

#### Illustration #3

#### Splits, Currents, and Holes

The bottom terrain in certain stretches of river can cause currents to divide and merge with no surface structure visible. Here you must recognize these splits

where fast meets slow and where many food lanes merge into one main lane.

**A. Current Splits** - Figure and Photo A illustrate current splits. Notice how the faster flowing water makes small waves and the slower is relatively smooth in comparison. Once again your target is where fast meets slow. Make casts so your offering crosses the splits in several locations or drifts along the edges. The fish may also be holding in the faster water behind submerged rocks and other obstacles, so working this area can also be productive.

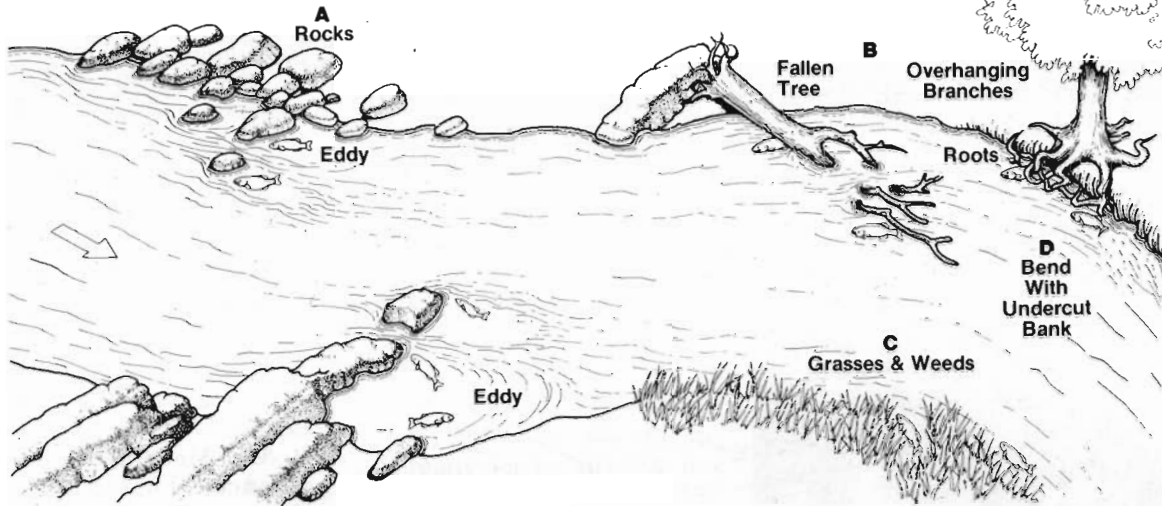
**B. & C. Merging Currents & Confluences** - Figures and Photo B & C shows a quieter stretch of water. Here the current lanes are moving slower and merging into main food lanes. Fish will move into these areas where the food is concentrated, the water is deeper, and the current is not so strong that a great deal of energy is needed to stay there. Frequently these locations can be identified by bubbles or debris congregating on the surface along the lane. Here again you want to work your offering across, along, and down through this area. This same type of condition can occur at the confluence of two rivers or as a feeder stream merges into a river shown in Figure C.

**D. Holes** - As the name implies, these are depressions in the river bottom. Fish enjoy being in holes for three good reasons: 1) food carried by the current settles out as it passes over them; 2) the current in a hole is slower than the faster moving water passing over top; and 3) the depth of the hold provides protection. The problem with holes is finding them. The surest way to find one is to walk into it. But this is not practical on many stretches of river. So you look for signs that show a deepening of water such as darker color or slowing of the current speed. (see Photo D-1) This may occur after a set of rapids (see Figures D) at the head of a pool or below a ledge, dam, or waterfall. When fishing a hole make sure you are getting down. Using more weight, a deep diving lure or giving your offering more time to sink before retrieving should help this effort.

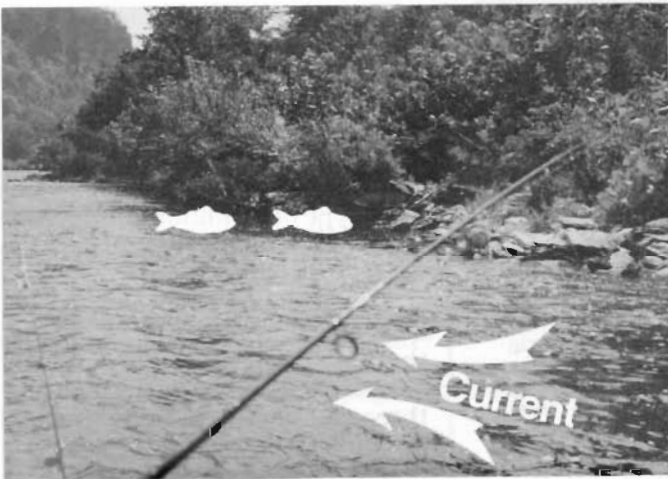
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#### SHORELINE STRUCTURE—Illustration #4



Photograph A



Photograph D



#### Illustration #4 Shoreline Structure

As water flows along a shoreline many types of habitat will be found. Usually shoreline water is shallow and slow moving, providing good holding spots. Deeper water nearby is ideal since this provides protection. Working the shoreline with consecutive casts as you move by may be the best approach but there are certain types of structures that deserve more concentration.

**A. Eddies** - Figure and Photo show an out-cropping of rocks breaking the flow and producing a slack water pocket along with a reversing current known as an eddy. Casting into these pockets is something that should not be overlooked.

**B. Fallen Trees and Overhanging Branches** - Another type of good structure no matter where you are fishing is fallen trees, stumps, branches, or roots. Figure B illustrates how fish may hold below, along, and behind a fallen tree. The tree breaks-up the current, shades the water, and provides protection.

**C. Grasses and Weeds** - Grasses along a shoreline as shown in Figure C provide good habitat for insects and bait fish. Fish will frequently cruise these grasses looking for food or hide in them waiting to ambush a passer by. Presenting parallel casts along the edge of the grasses may just bring on an attack.

**D. Bends** - A bend in a river provides even another type of shoreline structure. Figure and Photo D shows how a bend deflects current back into the main flow. Food floating in the current washes up along the shore into waiting mouths. If the bend is extremely sharp it may erode the shore causing an under cut bank which is known as the penthouse of river residences.

In all parts of a river and especially in large slackwater areas fish move about looking for food. Therefore, random casting may present your offering near a fish. But learning how to identify food lanes and holding spots and properly casting to them will greatly increase your chances of a hook-up. And, let's face it - that's the bottom line of any fishing.

*Credit—Fishing in Maryland Magazine*