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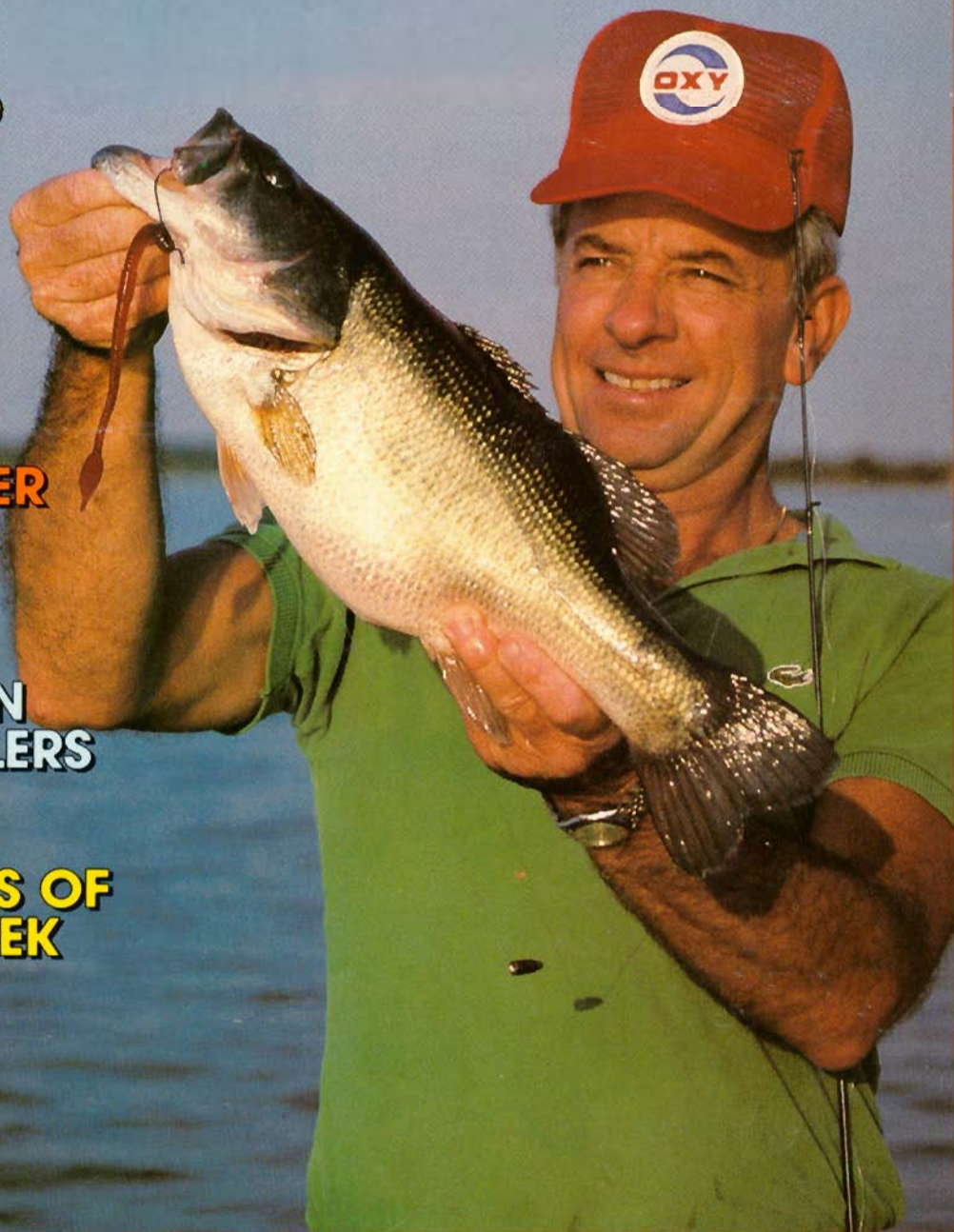
**UPDATE ON  
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**POTOMAC RIVER  
SMALLMOUTHS  
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# MARK KOVACH'S POTOMAC SMALLMOUTH STRATEGY

*This guide/fishing instructor knows the Potomac and its smallmouths and can put you on as pretty a stretch of water as you're likely to see.*

*by Tom Goodspeed*

Up in Loudoun County is one of the sweetest pieces of smallmouth bass water that a fellow could ask for. This is that section of the Potomac River from just above its confluence with the Shenandoah downstream to where Virginia's Route 287 reaches the Potomac at the small Maryland village of Brunswick. The waters of both rivers in this area are wide and shallow, with the bottoms pockmarked by zillions of slippery boulders and submerged limestone ledges that make this ideal smallmouth territory.

One of the draws to this spectacular country is the widely-acclaimed all-day Potomac float-fishing trip down this 8-mile stretch of the river offered by river guide and teacher extraordinaire Mark Kovach.

To know Mark Kovach is in itself an experience. Hailing from Silver Spring, Md., just outside the District of Columbia, Kovach has fished the Potomac for many years, and his first love always has been the fly rod. In fact, Kovach set up his fly-fishing schools in Harpers Ferry, right there where the two rivers meet, several years before he began his unique float-fishing trip business, which has been around now for close to a decade. Deciding to get back into fly-fishing after an absence of many years, I enrolled in Kovach's one-day fly-fishing course, joining a group that varied from weathered old-timers looking to sharpen their techniques to rank beginners who had never tossed a fly before. And later that day, I was waist deep in cold river water fighting scrappy smallmouth bass on my No. 7 weight fly outfit. I wasn't alone, either; all the other students were into bass as well.

It was when I stood there with the Potomac sweeping around my legs, talking to Kovach and watching him fish, that I realized the depth of his knowledge of the river. He would talk to us about the secrets in fishing such quickly flowing water, whether with a spinning rod or a fly rod.



*Mark Kovach, in his float boat downstream from the Rt. 340 bridge, signals that one of his clients is into a scrappy Potomac smallmouth. Photo by Ken Penrod.*

Naturally, it all revolved around reading the structure that is so apparent in the waters off the tiny stream-side village of Sandy Hook.

Here you can park your car alongside the railroad tracks across from the busy country store there, cross over the tracks, and go over the narrow walkway bridge over the C&D Canal to the river itself.

Then, as you look upstream beneath the towering Rt. 340 bridge or downstream to where the river disappears around the bend, you see what Kovach was talking about. The subject is "structure," structure in rapidly flowing water, and it is abundant.

The first thing you notice is the massive support pilings of the bridge itself. Downstream from these columns, shallow deltas have formed, holding gravel and grasses in relatively smoother flowing currents.

*(Continued)*

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Here the bronzebacks lie, and as you stand there and watch, you can see a splash here, another there, as smallmouth bass play and feed. A weighted Woolly Bugger cast into the slower current and retrieved back into the faster water by Kovach brings a quick strike and a nice 13-inch smallmouth.

Between the bridge columns the currents have worn the bottom deep and here the torrents of water adjacent to the still water behind the pilings produce what Kovach calls merge lines. With his fly rod, Kovach will move his lure either up or down that edge, working a Zonker or a Muddler so as to twitch or jog it, holding it in the current or even moving upstream. At one point, I paused to gaze at the scenery with my fly rod tucked beneath my arm, and the nymph I had been dragging in the current 20 feet downstream disappeared. The biggest bronzeback of the day nearly took the rod away from me.

Kovach pointed out this type of water to me, particularly the area where two separate currents merged together below that column. A similar situation exists downstream of most large rocks in the river, whether they reach above the surface or are buried deep. The secret here is to drift your fly or spinner along the edge of that tongue of current and let it sink deep. Then, if this fails to produce, try again but cast into the slower moving water and let the lure drift by either dragging free or in a pulsing, twitching retrieve, back out into the fast moving water.

One type of structure that is especially typical of much of the Potomac River is the chute formed where two large rocks back up the current, causing tumbling water to pour out in a rush between the two rocks. The bass will lie in the calm water behind the rock and dash out into the chute to grab the insect or shiner being washed by. To encourage this strike, the fly or spinner should be steered along the two outer edges of the chute so that the fish has to fight a minimum of current to catch his meal.

It pays to explore the chutes, too, if the edges are unproductive. Try to work the lure across the flow in the chute both in the middle as well as the tail of the flow, and work a marabou streamer with your line hand, creating pulsations and twitches that add life to the lure.

So much of the Potomac's bottom

along this stretch of the river is laden with rock that the water is best described as riffled, with all sorts of holes and pockets created that can hold fish. There are so many such places that drifts should be made so as to thoroughly explore as much of the water as you can reach. Kovach recommends letting a popping bug drift angularly across such water.

One spot often overlooked by both the spin-fisherman and the fly-caster is that bulge of water created where the flow of current hits a broad rock, builds to a height of 3 or 4 inches, and then splits to flow down both sides of the obstruction. Kovach pictures some bass in the slack water where the current splits, and says that a cast across that upper edge of the rock ledge can often yield a strike. He also emphasizes drifting your lure downstream towards the obstruction, taking several paths, one to the right, one down the middle and a third down the left-hand side of the flow.

I have gotten into tying my Woolly Buggers, Muddlers and Zonkers as weighted lures. I'll wrap the shank of the hook with the lead wire prior to tying my lure, and I'll fish such lures deep. On this stretch of the Potomac are literally thousands of holes, holes that can break your leg if you aren't careful.

In these deep holes food drops out of the current into the slower moving, more quiet water. Such holes can usually be spotted if polarizing glasses are worn, which take the glare off the water's surface. Spin-fishermen can slow the retrieve of a Mepps so as to drop the lure into such holes, down where the fish are.

The last water that Kovach discussed with us was that found along the shorelines. Two features excel here. One is the rocky, gravelly point that creates a pocket of downstream slack water, with an actual reversal of current in that pocket, forming an eddy. Here again it is that edge that produces. The lure entices the fish from the slack water into the stream.

The other major feature found on the banks of the Potomac is the grass beds: beautiful bait-holding stands of waving green underwater growth. Kovach says the bass lie in these grasses at its edge watching for baitfish washed along in the current.

Less frequently we find the deep water along the base of rocky cliffs

and where the water has scoured out the bottom in a bend in the stream. Here the biggest of the smallmouths can often be found, lying deep in the still, dark waters. Here, the fish will drift back and forth seeking food, and it is up to the angler to get his weighted lures down deep, close to the bottom. Often on such water, the fish lie suspended, and it pays the angler to swim his lure at various depths. Weighted marabou streamers are good in such instances.

The best way to learn this water is to line up a buddy, reserve a day with Kovach, and take his float trip for one long day on the river. The float trip is the only way to explore this water, and that is what Kovach offers. Wading can take you only so far.

His clients meet early at the River and Trail Outfitters on Valley Road, upstream from the first intersection with a flashing yellow on the Maryland side of the Rt. 340 bridge. You'll put in above Dam No. 3 in a 14 1/2-foot inflatable raft. Your drift will be comfortable, with a bucket seat and all the conveniences. The trip will take close to 12 hours on the river, and it will probably be well after dark when you disembark at the little town of Brunswick where a pickup truck will return you to your car.

You'll drift through some of the best water on the river, past the Needles to the confluence of the Shenandoah at Harpers Ferry. You'll drift through the towering cliffs of the Blue Ridge below the Whithorse Rapids and you'll be thoroughly tired by the end of the day.

Mark Kovach can be reached at 737 Thayer Ave., Silver Spring, MD 20910, phone (301)588-8742.

A good, general, descriptive map of the upper Potomac can be obtained by writing The Superintendent, C&O Canal National Historic Park, Box 4, Sharpsburg, MD 21782.

For the spin-fisherman, I'd suggest you take some 1/16- 1/8- and 1/4-ounce leadhead jigs and dress them with white, chartreuse and smoke Mister Twister soft plastic curly tailed grubs. Also take a couple of clear Tiny Torpedoes. The fly-rodders need only a few weighted Woolly Buggers of different brown and olive shades. Yes, you'll lose a fair number of lures, but their cost is relatively low. And be sure to take a camera; the scenery is something you'll remember forever. □



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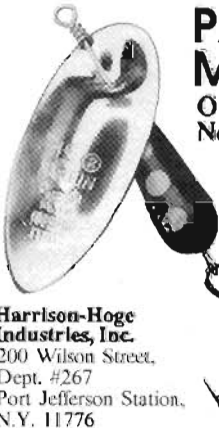
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