



# Converting to Smallmouth

*If you love rivers and feisty fish, try flies on smallmouth bass. The author tells you how.*

LARRY DAHLBERG

I WAS 12 WHEN I MET my first trout fly fisherman.

At the time I was junior member of the guiding staff at a smallmouth-bass fly-fishing camp, so it was only natural that this trout expert be assigned to me. I remember being totally awestruck at all his flies and paraphernalia. I had never felt more inadequate in my life than when he asked me what had been hatching on the river. He didn't even bother to explain his question when I replied that most of the waterfowl in the area nested at a large meadow adjacent to the river and that everything from Canada geese to mallards had hatched earlier in the summer.

We tried his little bugs at several good places but failed to turn up anything. Finally, out of desperation he tied on the

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"Yellow Killer" the head guide had given him.

I remember having to duck every time the fly came by and how his graceful casting stroke had turned into something more akin to a blind man trying to fend off a swarm of hornets with a willow switch. The way he flailed that Thermos-bottle-sized cork with yellow feathers made me doubt whether either of us would survive until lunch time. I remember wondering why—after all the effort it took to get the fly to the fish—he didn't even bother to pop the popper like he was supposed to! The only thing I could figure was that he was just too tired to work it.

Finally we came to the spot I now call the "old ladies and little kids pool." As usual, on the very first cast more than 10 feet from the boat, a smallmouth blasted the popper. I yelled, "Hit'em. Pull. Jerk!" My client seemed to totally ignore both me and the bass. After giving several bass

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in the pool a taste of the fly and catching none, we moved on.

I knew that everyone misses smallmouth sometimes, but I had never seen anything like this trout expert. He looked as though he wasn't even trying. He set the hooks with the authority of a new father changing his first really dirty diaper. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with this guy. I knew he was neither blind nor deaf—perhaps his adrenal gland had been removed. One thing I knew for certain, when I hollered "Hit him!" he didn't.

A half-dozen years passed before the shoe was on the other foot. I was a college freshman, for the first time living away from home and the fish I had grown up with. At the first opportunity I sought out the only water available, a beautiful trout stream 10 times bigger than the brookie creeks where I had wormed six-inchers in my youth. Fish were rising all over the place but they didn't look too big so I tied my smallest fly, a #6 Muddler, on a 10-pound tippet and went to work. The vision of those little brown trout scattering as I bombed them from 40 paces with my 10-weight bass outfit is forever etched in my memory...as is the sight of my first fly-caught trout (a seven-incher) whistling past my ear and into the pasture behind me. It was fortunate that I retrieved my prize before a cow stepped on it, because it's all I caught that day.

I knew then and there that fly fishing for trout was somehow different than the fishing I knew in warm-water lakes and rivers. Since that time I've grown to realize that recognizing these differences is the key to becoming a versatile all-species fly fisherman.

### The Conversion

THE MOST OBVIOUS DIFFERENCES you will encounter in converting from trout to smallmouth bass are in the size of the leaders, flies and the rod and line it takes to cast them. Instead of fly sizes #12, #14, #16 and smaller, propelled by DT4-, 5-, 6-weight lines, the bass fisherman most often uses flies from #2 up to #2/0 that require, depending on casting skill, weight-forward lines from size 6- to 10-weight to compensate for the wind resistance of the fly. I have no doubt that in the right situation any bass that swims could be landed on 2-pound tippet, but in normal situations you will do better with 8- to 12-pound tippets, on leaders from 7-1/2- to 9-foot long.

Rather than retrieving with the rod tip held high and gently lifting to strike—as in light-tippet trout fishing—when you're bass fishing, you keep your tip low to the water, pointing at the fly, and strip line with your left hand. When a bass takes, set the hook quickly and crisply with no



DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

The author's arsenal of smallmouth flies in the photograph below: (top row, from left) Deerhair Bug, Dahlberg Dilg and a rabbit-tail Dahlberg Diver. In the bottom row: a Flashabou Muddler and two versions of Minnow-Body Matuka, one with a rabbit-strip wing and the other with a stripped-feather wing. Fished correctly, these basic patterns will take bruisers like the one above.



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concern for breaking the tippet. I recommend hauling with the left hand during the strike in much the same manner as one would lift a fly off the water for a backcast.

Developing sufficient line speed to cast the large fly is a problem many trout fishermen encounter. Ninety-nine percent of the problem is *timing*—specifically, not waiting long enough on the back cast. Timing becomes more critical with bass bugs because they're heavier and more wind-resistant than trout flies. In addition, the typical bass situation demands handling much more line than you would fishing for trout. Obviously the more line you have in the air the more time you need for the loops to straighten.

Another universal casting problem I see in trout-to-bass converts is lifting the fly out of the water—especially with flies designed to dive. The trick is to make a conscious effort to gradually lift the line then the leader from the water, holding back the power stroke on the lift and back-cast for the actual crisp "snatch" of the fly from the surface. A short single-haul with the left hand makes all the difference in cleanly getting the fly off the water and on its way into a high-velocity backcast. This technique also prevents the bug from making a loud *gerblurp* as it leaves the water.

The gradual-lift technique also allows you to watch the water immediately be-

hind the fly just prior to pick up. Bass often follow a surface fly a great distance, and the acceleration of the lift often triggers the fish into making a move which you can see directly behind the fly. Force yourself to leave the fly in the water to tease the follower into striking, especially if you are using a diver. If you take the fly away from a follower, your odds of catch-

ing the fish are drastically reduced because you have pulled the fish away from his ambush point.

### Strategy

UNLIKE TROUT, SMALLMOUTH are seldom selective in their feeding preferences. In most of the streams I fish, minnows and small fish make up most of a smallmouth's

diet, but it will eat almost anything that comes along including snakes, frogs, mice, worms, leeches, crayfish and insects that are plentiful or large enough to be of interest.

I prefer seeing and hearing a fish take the fly. Fishing flies close to, or on, the surface is not always the most effective way

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## Smallmouth Bass Flies

MY ARSENAL CONSISTS of five basic fly designs: a popper, diver, slider, matuka style streamer and a muddler style streamer. These patterns imitate nothing in particular, but their ability to do certain things in the water triggers smallmouth into striking. Another factor designed into my workhorse flies is castability—the deadliest fly in the world is of little value to the angler if it cannot consistently and accurately be presented to the fish.

### Deer-hair Bug

I USE THIS FLY for eddies and in moderate current. Its shape should be totally symmetrical and small enough to cast easily. I use Mustad #3366 hooks, sizes #3/0 to #4 for this pattern. A light flip of the rod should cause the fly to make a soft bubble in the water. The best retrieve pattern is a series of short, swimming pops with three- to 10-second rests in between. I like to mend the line during the swim-pop cycle so the fly dead drifts during the free float. My favorite colors are forest green, white, yellow, black and natural.

### Dahlberg Dilg

AN UPDATED VERSION of an old cork-body-hackle fly is called the Wilder-Dilg or Feathered Minnow. My version has a short strip of dyed rabbit for a tail with stripped, palmered rabbit for hackle and clipped deer hair for a head. The hook is a #2 Mustad 3366. It's tapered head makes the "Dilg" slide, bounce and skitter on the surface, creating an unusual disturbance. An aerodynamic shape makes this fly one of the easiest bass bugs to cast and can be handled easily on a 6-weight outfit.

This fly is deadly in flat, shallow fast-water pools where I fish it with a downstream belly in the line and allow it to skim on the surface leaving a slight V in the water behind it. Vary retrieves to trigger bass when they are hitting short on traditional popping bugs. About the only wrong thing you can do with a Dilg is not watch it. My favorite colors—white, yellow or chartreuse.

### Dahlberg Diver (Rabbit Tail)

SINCE TOM SCHMUEKER OF WAPSI Fly Co. introduced me to his dyed rabbit skins, life has become more difficult for the local smallmouths! The substitution of a narrow rabbit-skin strip for the standard marabou-and-hackle dressing make this fly even more effective than the original (see FFM, Sept. 1983).

The diver is effective in all types of cover. You can pop it, swim it beneath the surface or alternate between the two. The vortex created behind the diving collar has a strong effect on the rabbit strip tail, causing it to lengthen and shorten as the fly is twitched or accelerated. The rabbit-tail diver is especially effective fished above logs and brush piles where you dive it, then slip it back with the current and underneath obstructions. To get the maximum resurfacing effect from this fly it may be necessary to dress it often with a powdered drying agent. I tie this fly on #2 to #3/0 Mustad #3366 hooks in colors the following color combinations: yellow with gold Flashabou, white with light blue Flashabou, chartreuse with lime Flashabou, brown with bronze Flashabou and black with black Flashabou.

If you have trouble making the rabbit-strip diver work properly, check the fly's head for symmetry and make sure the tail is not too short. I recommend pinching the barb down on this fly because the fish tend to take it very deeply in their throats.

### Flashabou Muddler

I JOKINGLY REFER TO THIS FLY as my Mepps imitation. It is most effectively fished in fast water or with a fast swimming retrieve, especially if the water is warm and clear. The brighter the sun shines, the more effective this fly becomes. I tie this simple pattern using red marabou for a tag, white chenille for a body, Flashabou wing, and a clipped deer-hair head. My favorite colors are silver, copper, gold or pearl. Hook sizes range from #8 to #1/0. I prefer ring-eye hooks, but almost any hook with standard to 2X shank length will work.

### Minnow-Body Matuka

THIS ZONKER-STYLE fly is made with either dyed rabbit or hackle for a dorsal wing and a new material called Flashabou Minnow Body (see FFM, July, 1984). The fly works in all types of cover but especially in fast, rocky sections and swift, dark runs. I find that frequently switching colors in one pool often triggers stubborn fish to strike. My favorite color is chartreuse but I have had good success with white, yellow, pink, olive, black and blue. It is effective when fished quartered downstream and stripped erratically upstream, alternately allowing it to hang motionless in the current for several seconds at a time. I tie this fly on the longest shank hooks I can find in sizes #4 to #3/0.

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to rack up strikes, but it is the most fun, requires the most casting skill and will almost always produce fish. The key to success is locating fish that are susceptible to shallow-water fly techniques.

### Logs and Brush

DEPENDING UPON THE BOTTOM TYPE, logs and brush can provide shade, added depth or both. When I look for good smallmouth log/brush locations, I like to see a fairly swift current, moderately clear water and a light-colored sand or gravel bottom. Bass hold directly beneath the deep brushpiles most of the time. When they are active they move toward the upstream or top end of the banks. In flat, sandy stretches of river these banks often have a long, tapering cut of deep water at the head, above which I start casting. My first choice of flies in this situation is a standard deerhair popper or diver, large enough to interest a big fish.

The trout angler is concerned with a delicate presentation, but the bass angler needn't worry about *splating* the fly onto the surface. In fact, I think it often attracts the fish. The key in presenting a fly in the brush is accurate casting and a thorough retrieve. The cast should be inches under the bank, the fly must be as tight against the bank as possible. Work the fly in a series of gentle swimming pops parallel to the cover. I like to cast from just slightly upstream and alternate a foot or so of swimming pops with two or three feet of dead drift to get the fly close to the cover.

On your first cast to a prime spot *always* retrieve the fly well out from the bank or visible logs to give either fish holding deep or following fish a shot at it. I like to keep the fly on the water until it "turns the corner" on the retrieve. Like trout, bass are often triggered by this direction change. The diver is especially effective "on the corner" where it can be twitched and slipped in the current, using seductive twitch-and-dead-drift combinations. When working from a boat on the upstream side of a log or brushpile, be sure to maintain an upstream position. This angle allows you to keep a fish away from the brush after it's hooked. For brush/log cover I use nine-foot leaders with 10-pound tippets for pressuring a snag-bound three-pounder or for pulling an errant cast from the limbs of an overhanging maple.

### Undercuts/Grass Banks

ALTHOUGH I'VE SEEN SOME GREAT BASS near undercut grass banks—especially big fish—such places are seldom consistent producers. Most undercut banks are "clay-based" and lack the dense cover it takes to support large numbers of fish consistently. But when additional features such as brush, beaver runs or zig-zags in the

shoreline are found, clay undercuts are likely to hold fish. I fish such banks from a much closer distance (30-40 feet) and with a shorter retrieve (10-12 feet) than I would a log/brush bank, because the proximity allows me to get many more casts tight to the bank, and the fish are not likely to strike more than six to eight feet from the shore. My fly in such a situation would be either a standard hair popper or perhaps a diver or a slider if the fish were striking short.

### Rocks

ON MOST SMALLMOUTH RIVERS rocky cover takes one of two basic forms—banks and pools. My idea of the ideal rock bank involves an outside bend lined with rocks of assorted sizes from softball-size up to the size of small automobiles. My approach on such banks is similar to the grass undercut approach, except that I work the fly out into the river as far as the rocks extend—even if that means 60, 70 feet or farther.

Experimenting with retrieve speed and length is important in such a situation, as is varying the length of dead drift you allow between swimming and popping. I often work the best rock banks two or three times to be certain I have covered them thoroughly.

### Ledgerrock and Pools

THOUGH THE BASS MAY BE SMALLER, for sheer numbers of fish there is no substitute for ledgerrock and pools. The bottom often is composed of intermittent bedrock with scattered boulders and rubble as well as cracks and fissures where the smallmouth hold. The pools are formed either by large cracks in the bedrock where the bottom simply "falls away," or by the damming effect of a shallow riffle immediately downstream. Frequently these areas will occur in a riffle-pool-riffle-pool sequence, custom tailored for the wading fly fisherman.

The real trick to effectively fishing such spots is in first identifying their boundaries. Once you have established the boundaries, position yourself to work all the edges of the pool.

My first choice of surface flies for this situation is a slider fly I call the Dahlberg Dilg. I like to start at the upstream corner of the pool, beginning with short casts to the upstream edge, letting the fly skate and quarter across the current. I gradually lengthen my casts until I reach the opposite edge of the pool. I continue working that way all the way down the pool, shifting position 15 or 20 feet at a time until the fly's downstream path brings it along the pool's tailout. If I am unable to produce fish in this manner I'll repeat the process using a Flashabou Muddler, Mataka or diver, concentrating on the fastest or deepest water.

One of the most effective tactics I use in pools is something I call "one fish, two fish." Here's how it works: The moment you hook a fish and have it under control, your fishing partner immediately casts three feet or so upstream from the hooked fish, letting the current take the fly as close to the hooked fish as possible (the best fly is a white, sinking fly.) Often a hooked bass disgorges its stomach, and the rest of the fish in the school scramble for the "free lunch." By immediately presenting a fly near a hooked fish, another fish in the pool often will nail it. Bring fish #1 quickly to the boat while fish #2 does what it pleases. Quickly release fish #1 and cast near hooked fish #2 which may result in fish #3. Your partner quickly boats and releases fish #2 and repeats the process for fish #4.

My record for this method is 16 in a row, set a few years ago fishing with a lady who had never fly fished before. We caught and released the 12 bass, from one to three pounds, as fast as we could pull them in.

### Weeds

ALMOST EVERY OLD-TIME smallmouth fisherman I know hates weeds. I don't blame them, but to exclude weed cover from the list of places to fish can be a costly error. Stream smallmouth are not likely to frequent stagnant weed patches in some slough or back eddy, but weed growth adjacent to swift water and a bit of strewn rock is prime cover. The best way to keep weeds from upsetting your day is to use flies equipped with an effective weed-guard, but if you dislike weed-guards, you can reduce your snags by fishing from downstream, casting up.

The best areas in a river weed patch are under the downstream canopy formed by the current that stretches the weeds out with its flow. The most aggressive fish will be under the upstream end of a canopy, working the outside weed edge next to the best current flow. My favorite surface fly for such a location is a slider (Dahlberg Dilg), although a dragonfly nymph, dead drifted along these patches is deadly.

If I have learned anything during 23 years of guiding smallmouth-bass fishermen, it is this: As weather, water conditions and the seasons change, the cover in which bass are vulnerable to a fly changes also. By identifying the various types of cover and fishing them thoroughly, you can usually establish a daily pattern.

Any trout fly fisherman who is willing to modify certain elements the basic trout approach will have no trouble converting to stream smallmouth. You may even grow to respect the smallmouth's unusual attributes, subtle grace and dogged staying power and pay tribute to this noble fish by releasing it back into the stream from which it came.

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