

Mississippi

Headwaters

DENNY GAFFNEY

An angler fishes the upper Mississippi in its most productive fishing stretch, from St. Cloud to Minneapolis (See map).

Superb warmwater fishing using a technique called "river slipping"

BORN IN THE WILD rice lakes of northern Minnesota, the winding Mississippi flows clean and swift for 500 miles before beginning its work as an important commercial artery to America's heartland.

Preserved and protected by Minnesota's Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, this headwaters reach—from Lake Itasca to St. Anthony Falls in downtown Minneapolis—is a beautiful, often-wild haven for wildlife, waterfowl, and gamefish. Smallmouth bass are the prize for the angler on the upper Mississippi River, but some stretches also offer excellent walleye fishing. Northern pike, muskellunge, crappies, largemouth bass, and channel cats are also found here, and they make fly fishing always exciting.

And you can catch fish *all summer long*. Unlike most area lakes and trout streams, here the rule of thumb is: The hotter the weather, the hotter the fishing. The river's constant flow and turbulence keep the water fresh and cool and full of oxygen. As a result, the fish are always active. Using a technique called "river slipping," and knowing where the fish are and what they forage on, a fly fisher can find a fishing bonanza on the Mississippi's headwaters during the dog days of summer.

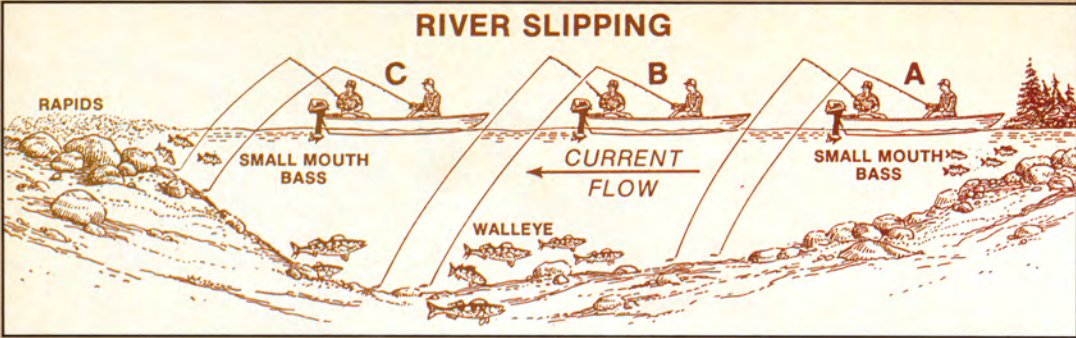
The most enjoyable and refreshing way to fish the headwaters is an all-day float trip, with a stop for a shore lunch. I often float the major reach of the headwaters, from the mouth of the Crow Wing River in

central Minnesota to the Twin Cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul), covering about 12 river miles in a day's float.

I have found the most productive fishing from St. Cloud to Minneapolis, about 70 miles. The Beaver Islands stretch near St. Cloud, an archipelago with more than 30 islands, is a popular canoe route alive with wildlife, where beaver swim and blue heron patiently stalk the shallows. Ospreys patrol the river, and occasionally a bald eagle soars overhead. To reach the Beaver Islands, head upstream from the boat launch at the State Highway 24 bridge near the town of Clearwater, 12 miles east of St. Cloud. Paddlers can put a canoe in at a spillway below St. Cloud and float downriver to the islands.

The next natural stretch (extending from the Clearwater launch downstream to Monticello Park, near Monticello on Wright County Road 75) is also about 12 miles long and my favorite day-trip stretch. Trophy smallmouth, walleyes, and muskies are often taken from this productive water, especially below the junction of Silver Creek with the Mississippi, seven miles from the put-in point.

A third 12-mile section, still relatively undeveloped (from Monticello to the town of Elk River), also has large river walleyes and smallmouth in the 5-pound class. You'll find access points along Wright County Road 39, which parallels the river on the south side; at Ellison Park; at Kadler Avenue (about half way), and at Nashua Avenue and Otsego (3 miles farther). Guide Joe



To river slip effectively use your motor running slow enough to allow the boat to slip downstream slower than the current. The current imparts action to the fly. The author's flies, below, include a crayfish and two imitations of the stonerollers that are a major food source for gamefish on the river.

Gapen offers day float trips on the Clearwater-to-Monticello leg, or from Monticello to Elk River (\$175/day for one or two people, including shore lunch). For further information, contact Gapen at (612) 263-3596, or through the Big Lake Sport Shop, Big Lake, MN 55309, phone (612) 263-2280.

A fourth 12-mile stretch of river, from Elk River to Anoka, is more urban, and the river becomes broad as three major tributaries empty into it. You'll find access points and good fishing near the mouth of each tributary—the Elk River at Elk River, the Crow River at Dayton, and the Rum River at Anoka. As the big river enters the Twin Cities metropolitan area, a reservoir created by the Coon Rapids Dam offers good walleye and crappie fishing. A boat launch and canoe rental with shuttle service are available at the dam site, which is maintained as a county park. Below the dam, canoeists and fishermen alike favor the smallmouth-rich riffles and rapids in this final reach before the river becomes busy with commerce and industry. (Barge navigation begins at Minneapolis.)

While canoes have been used for centuries on Mississippi headwaters, many rivermen today find a jonboat to be more practical because of its flat, stable bottom and shallow draft. I use a sturdy 14-foot aluminum jonboat with a livewell built into the middle seat to keep a few fish fresh for shore lunch (the rest are released). For "slip fishing," or "river slipping," I use a 3.9-horsepower outboard, but some guides use a 6-horse, which gets them upstream faster. It's important to use a motor that doesn't have a shear pin (slip-clutch design), and always carry an extra propeller—river rocks can easily damage a prop. I also carry a canoe paddle: A 6-foot paddle thrust into the water can quickly determine the depth and type of stream bottom—sand, mud, gravel, or rocks.

River Slipping

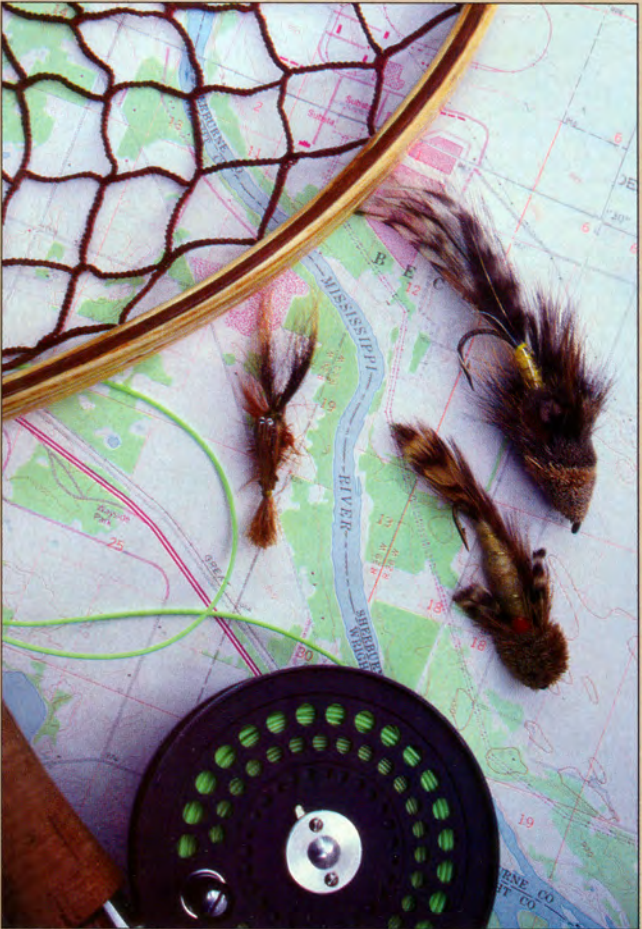
ALTHOUGH I DO ANCHOR and wet wade, I find slipping a more productive way to fish deep troughs and slicks that hold fish during hot days. Shallow water is too warm and too low in oxygen content in summer for most gamefish. Bank areas, obstructions, and back eddies that hold good fish in spring or fall hold only small or rough fish during the hot days of summer.

The slipping technique was introduced by Dan Gapen, who learned it from native Ojibwa Indians while growing up along Ontario's Nipigon River. (Dan's father, Don Gapen, originated the Muddler Minnow fly.) When slipping, the angler points his boat upstream and

runs the motor at a speed slow enough to allow the boat to slip downstream slower than the current.

I use slipping most effectively in deep slicks usually found just above rapids, where river fish wait for dislodged crayfish or minnows to come tumbling down. Other productive slipping areas include just ahead of large protruding boulders, tail-outs of eddies—wherever there are current breaks. Underwater boulders indicate excellent spots to slip fish, because they hold fish. You can locate the boulders by surface boils just downstream of the boulder. The boulders' irregular shapes often provide slack-water pockets in front of or behind them. Smallmouths hold tight, while walleyes spread out in the slack water behind the boulder at the fast-water/slow-water current break, or seam. Pools below rapids also hold smallmouths, and walleyes often hold in the deep heart of the pool.

The prime time for slip fishing on the upper Mississippi and its tributaries is from early July through mid-September.



The St. Cloud to Minneapolis stretch of the river has exceptional smallmouth bass fishing. The author holds a typical river smallmouth (left).

Stonerollers and Crayfish

IN SUMMER, the upper river's deeper channels and pools are usually from eight to ten feet deep. Fishing these prime areas requires a sinking-tip line and a 4- to 6-foot leader. For shallower areas, a floating line with a 9-foot leader works best. To maximize fishing time, I use two rods—a 5-weight with a floating line, and an Orvis 7-weight boron with a sinking-tip. The 9' 3", 5-weight balanced with an Orvis CFO reel works especially well for fishing crayfish patterns. The long, light graphite rod has the sensitivity to detect the often-subtle take of river bass and walleyes, and the 7-weight is powerful, capable of throwing a big sculpin or stoneroller minnow imitation that I use in deep water.

Crayfish are abundant on the headwaters and the preferred prey of most river fish. Bass cruise the rocky areas in search of crawdads, often positioning themselves, like trout, alongside boulders, waiting there for a crayfish to drift by.

I favor a simple crayfish tie designed by guide Doug Larsen. His durable pattern is tied on a Mustad 9672 hook (#4 to #8). The head and pincers are formed using red squirrel tail, and the thorax and abdomen are of olive chenille. I fish the Crayfish below the surface, allowing it to drift or tumble along naturally with the current. You can also simulate a fleeing crayfish by simply twitching the fly with a jerky rod movement. The pattern is more natural and more effective unweighted, but in deeper water I use split-shot on the leader to keep the fly near bottom.

Although crayfish are a staple food for smallmouth and walleyes, big river fish love slow-moving, bottom-dwelling sculpins and stonerollers common to these waters. Dark Muddlers, Whitlock Sculpins, and Spuddlers are effective patterns, but to my knowledge there are no specific commercial imitations of the big stoneroller. Stonecat (Mad Tom) flies are available com-

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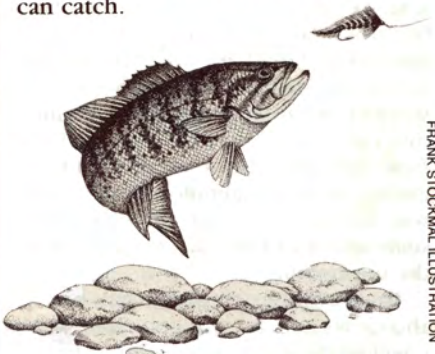
Mississippi . . .

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mercially, but the stonecat is of the family Ictaluridae (catfish) and is similar in name only to the stoneroller, which is a member of the family Cyprinidae (minnows), often described as a "cross between a fathead minnow and a chub."

The common stoneroller (*Camptostoma anomalum*) is a large minnow with a mottled brownish-black body, characterized by a cartilaginous ridge in the lower jaw, and large tubercles on the head. Stonerollers are nest builders, with the male carrying small pebbles to gravel areas to construct the nest in a large diameter. The females deposit their eggs in the circle of stones. Stonerollers are found from Minnesota across the Great Plains to Texas and eastward to the Atlantic Coast. They prefer large rivers, although they are often found in small rivers and some lakes. A lifelike representation of the stoneroller was developed for me by John Roglinske of Fly Fisher Two, Neshkoro, WI 54960. His beautiful fly is a fixed-wing streamer tied on a long-shank hook. If you live within the stoneroller's range, give this superb pattern a try.

If you don't live in stoneroller country, the chances are you'll have a big river nearby on which to try the slipping technique, using crayfish and sculpin patterns. Slip fishing takes practice, but after a few hours on the water, you'll be surprised how much you can learn and how many fish you can catch.



FRANK STOCKMALL ILLUSTRATION

Guide to the Headwaters

THOSE WANTING MORE INFORMATION about the Mississippi headwaters should read *A Gathering of Waters*, a guidebook to Minnesota's rivers. Intended for canoeists, the publication contains photographs, descriptions, and detailed maps that list river miles and identify rapids, dams, portages, campsites, and access locations. To obtain a copy, call or write: Rivers Division, Minnesota Dept. of Natural Resources, Box 10, Centennial Office Building, St. Paul, MN 55155, (612) 296-6784.

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