

One of America's best-known trout fishermen reveals a secret love

The Most Whithair Bass Bug

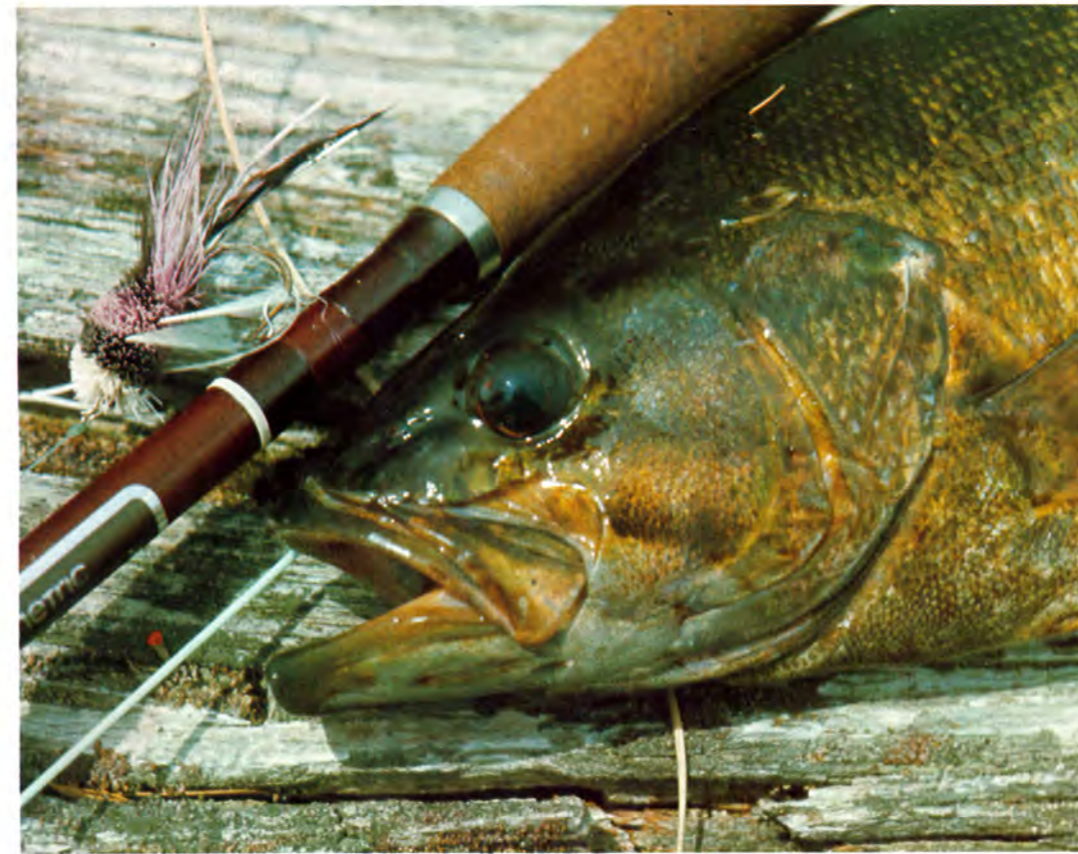
DAVE WHITLOCK

FLY FISHING FOR GAMEFISH other than trout is enjoying a fine increase in popularity. Fewer opportunities at good trout waters, increased damming of rivers and streams, the energy crunch and an increased need for local recreation—plus the emergence of a more realistic fly fishing philosophy—are among the factors bringing about this growing and overdue interest in other fish for the fly rod.

Bass bugging is a fly fishing method that provides a very special sensation—unlike, but as unique as, that felt when casting to a sunset-tinted pool of wild browns or

walking through a golden cornfield to flush a hidden covey of dynamite bobwhite. To do it well, an angler must know as much as possible about his tackle, the area he's fishing, and the bass's habits and moods. When done correctly, it can be just as exacting, exciting and meaningful an angling pursuit as anyone might experience on any trout stream or salmon river.

Being born in the Midwest where the bass is king in the cooler streams and warm-water reservoirs, I naturally inherited bass fishing with bait casting and fly rod in the older days of cruder tackle. But I betrayed my Oklahoma



A typical Maine smallmouth turned sucker by a TMWB. All photos and art by the author.

heritage and fell hopelessly in love with fly fishing for trout before I turned fifteen. I still argue with myself, parents, and friends how this could have come about while living in Oklahoma!

There was never then—nor will there ever be—enough hours and days available for me to spend on trout water. A man's work, his family, his health and the seasons of the year are all limiting factors. So I made my delightful rediscovery of the bass while trying to sublimate my frustrations. But it was only while selecting the special bass pattern for this article that I began to realize why I feel so much affection for bass bugging after all the unsuccessful youthful courtships I had with these fish.

Unfortunately, bass bugging still carries the ancient connotation of a sport made muscular by big rods, rope-like lines and bugs better described as monster imitations in weight and size. If a two-pound smallmouth lasted more than 30 seconds between the hook set and the stringer, it was only because your arm and shoulder already ached from casting these winch-rigs for several hours.

About 20 years ago, I was in love with a little 7-foot Shakespeare Wonder Rod I had bought with a few hard-saved bucks. The local bluegills and green sunfish put a good bend in it but I still wondered how a smallmouth, largemouth or Kentucky bass would feel on such a fairy wand. My cork bugs, especially my favorite—a big rubber-skirted Hula Popper—cast like a bowling ball with it. With a little size-D level line, I soon had the big bug fishing the water *behind* me as much as I did in front of

me. I knew I was surely going to pop the tip or male ferule if I kept up the herky-jerky bass bug casting on my little white pet.

Then Dave Bolin, another underground Oklahoma trout fisherman, and I made up some deer hair bugs after those described in my dog-eared Herter's catalog. It was mid-fall when Dave and I waded up northeastern Oklahoma's Illinois River to try our bass hairbugs on some of this beautiful river's plentiful Kentucky and smallmouth bass. I was amazed on that golden fall afternoon to learn how well the hairbugs cast, landed and were eaten by our gluttonous friends. I shall never forget the experience of being able to cast a bass bug so easily on that light rod; the way it sailed the needed distance, landing softly among the roots and limestone pockets with a sound so vividly alive—so realistic to my ears and to those bass, too! The strikes were so positive that we could hardly make the fish turn loose.

Suddenly I was having a lot of fun with this trout rod, casting and catching *bass!* For sure! Since that afternoon, I have come to know and love warm-water fly fishing on a par with the very best of trouting. Now don't wrinkle your nose at poor old Whitlock until you've tried it my way.

Since that fall of 1957, a lot of water has been covered with bass bugs by me and a lot of other bass fly fishermen. There are a lot of new products on the market now that reflect the best of what we have already learned plus both new and revitalized old patterns. Lighter and



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more powerful glass and graphite fly rods and new line tapers are now being marketed which excel at overcoming the delivery problem inherent in most large bass flies. In the course of future issues, FLY FISHERMAN will be covering all these areas of advancement and techniques, but let's start with a key to open the door for you to the joys and challenges of modern light-tackle bass bugging.

I HAVE ATTEMPTED during the last 18 or 19 years to arrive at a basic hairbug design that could bug *most* bass into taking it *most* of the time it is served up in *most* streams and lakes. I have dubbed it, for lack of a better name—The Most Whithairbug (TMWB). [*Pronounced, we gather, "Whit-hair Bug."* Editors.] It is only an *original* pattern in that it is a hybrid of as many good ideas as I could incorporate from proven "hard heads" (cork, plastic, and balsa poppers) and the various hairbugs I have read about and used during its development. Perhaps it incorporates one or two new ideas, but that is a rather broad claim to make in the fly-tying world these days!

The TMWB should prove competitive with other bass bugs—hard heads or hair—from Canada to Mexico. With some size and color variation, it is a bug with great ver-

A perfect spot for action with a TMWB.



Hair-bodied bugs offer a life-like texture which this traditional hardhead type can never equal.



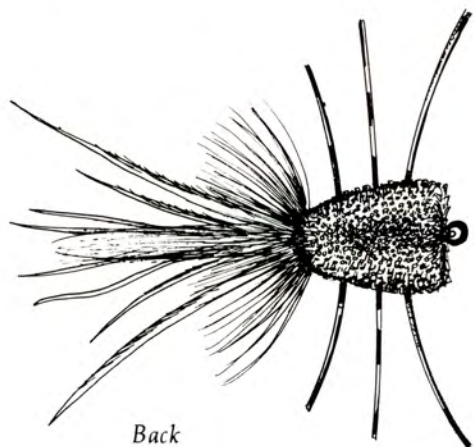
Joel Whitlock wrestles with a largemouth that took a TMWB.



Face



Side



Back

Three views of a typical TMWB

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satilaty and attraction for fish, even for other species including trout, pike, and saltwater gamefish. Its versatility is also enhanced because, in reasonable sizes, it can be cast easily, with even 4-weight systems. The Whithair-bug will handle well on an outfit two sizes smaller than required for a hard-head popper of the same size. This fact brings bass-bugging into a new light—more ease and fun for the fly fisherman and tackle that fits the bulldog tactics of bass.

This pattern will adapt to most of the effective angling methods that all types of bass seem to fall for throughout their geographic ranges. It will work well retrieved fast, medium or slow, or with no retrieve. It will pop or not pop, dive or slide, depending on how you work it. It has a bass-maddening action when just floating on any moving or quiet surface.

The combination of soft, chewy deer hair, rubber wing-legs, and hackle feathers cannot be equaled as a proved fish-attractor. It can be fished in open water, or in the most dense aquatic jungle without dragging back a fistfull of weeds. Maybe that's its greatest asset! In any event, it simulates those natural and unnatural creatures that bass like to bite, ranging from minnows to insects, to mice, to snakes, to little green men!

About three years ago in June, this tie made a lot of Maine smallmouth bass, and outdoor writers, respect its effectiveness. Doug Swisher and I were helping with a Berkley fishing program at Leen's Lodge on Grand Lake Stream in eastern Maine. One of the scheduled half-day outings for outdoor writers was on the Third Machias Lake; scheduled performers were some of Maine's famous smallmouths.

My first choice on this new water was a #4 yellow, chartreuse and black TMWB. The big cedar canoe had

barely come to rest when I had a bug spotted next to a moss-crowned granite boulder at the shoreline. The silver rings from the bug's impact were about a yard in diameter on the rich, tea-colored water when a smallmouth blasted my bug hard and fast. I still remember how high the thousands of water drops scattered in the sunlight as they haloed the first jump.

Almost every bit of cover in that lovely bay produced a great little smallmouth. These fish ran 10-18 inches but all were longwinded high-jumpers, and my 7½-foot rod got quite a workout from those bronze thugs. Occasionally, a chain pickerel would play barracuda and streak from a weedy hideout, either just before or right on bug impact, and chop the bug from my 2x tippet. It didn't take me long to decide to keep my bug away from the aquatic weeds that hid these razor-dentured bug thieves. John, our guide, nearly fell out of the canoe laughing at my excited southern drawl when the chains scissored away at my bug.

We found that afternoon at the big shore lunch of ten canoe parties that only Doug and myself had put the hurt on many smallmouth. The pattern was the same in both cases and TMWB had worked its spell better than those streamers, hard heads, spinner baits, plastic worms, jigs and plugs our conference guests were using. This was not surprising but almost an instant replay of days on assorted farm ponds, Lake of the Woods, Lake Novilla in northwestern Mexico, Florida's St. Luce River, and Lake Mead. —

[Dave's instructions for tying "The Most Whithair Bug" (TMWB) will be found as the lead-off feature in this issue's Fly Tier's Bench department, of which Whitlock officially becomes "Conductor" effective with this issue. The Editors.]

Fly Fisherman

