Stream Smallmouth BASS

DAVE WHITLOCK

DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

Smallmouth become more interested in surface feeding as water temperatures rise above 60 degrees. When the water temperatures are cooler (below 60 degrees) they prefer to feed close to bottom and will take flies that imitate nymphs and other subsurface foods. Dave Whitlock illustration.

DAVID J. SIEGFRIED PHOTO

Whitlock's Deep Sheep Shad Minnow

SMALLMOUTH HAVE CHIPS ON THEIR SHOULDERS, a bad attitude about anything that gets in their way. They fear no fish, or anything else. I can't think of any fish that has more determination when hooked, or more moves and tricks to break free. They make heart-stopping surface takes, spine-tingling, explosive, tail-vaulting jumps, and leader-popping dashes. And they have frequent unpredictable and challenging mood swings that make them difficult to figure out. I'll never tire of fishing for smallmouth bass, the best all-around, freshwater fly-fishing gamefish.

Smallmouth—some people call them smallies or bronzebacks—are more like trout than other bass, although they can be very basslike. For example, on a smallmouth river in Ontario's Quetico Provincial Park, my wife Emily and I were working upstream in a canoe, catching fat 1/2- to 1 1/2-pound smallmouth that were porking out on hatching #10 cinnamon caddis. It was a ball, except we had expected to catch larger fish.

After a while, Emily cut off her Elk-hair Caddis and put on a Waker Sheep Minnow that looked like a small sunfish. Almost immediately she hooked a 4 1/2-pound smallmouth! The big fish was almost choking on caddis pupae but just couldn't forget it was a bass, not a trout. It launched itself after the 3-inch-long surface minnow with a ferociousness seldom seen on trout streams. Such a big fly cast over rising trout would have triggered a panic and put all the fish down.

Many times smallmouth have brutalized my tackle and stolen my leader and fly with their bad attitudes and brutish methods. They have taught me a lot and forced me to hone my skills. Here's what I've learned.

Show Them the Menu

TODAY'S MENU FOR SMALLMOUTH: aquatic insects, minnows, crayfish, terrestrial insects, frogs, snails, mice, leeches, smaller smallmouth, cicadas, aquatic worms, snakes, salamanders, and many other things that look alive in the water.

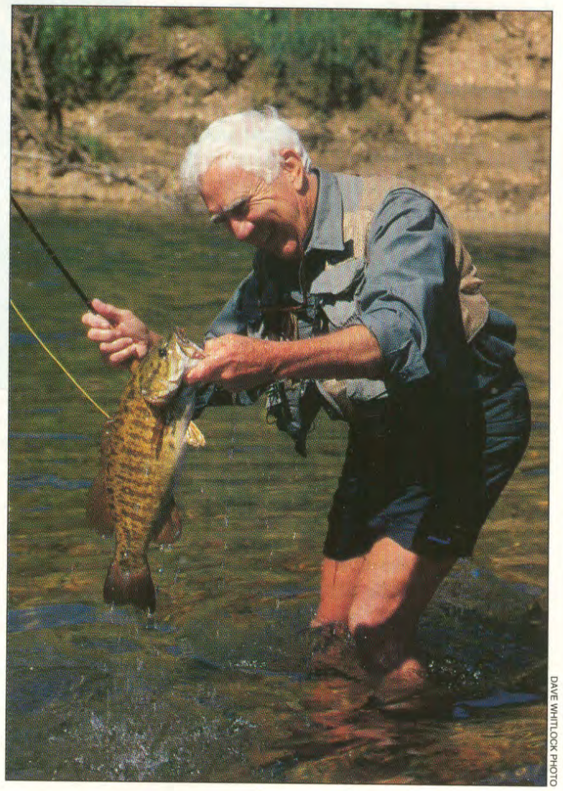
How to catch these marvelous fly-rod gamefish in streams

DAVID J. SIEGFRIED PHOTO

Whitlock's Gold-bead Sillyleg Redfox Squirrel Nymph

DAVID J. SIEGFRIED PHOTO

Whitlock's Nearnuff Sculpin



DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

Most of the time smallmouth focus on the bigger foods on their menu, unlike most trout. Also, they prefer to dine close to bottom, not at the water's surface, when the water temperature is below 60 degrees. As the water temperature rises above 60 degrees, smallmouth become more and more interested in surface feeding. When the water rises above about 85 degrees, the fishing declines unless the water is well aerated.

Smallmouth, which are a coolwater fish (preferring water temperatures from 55 to 75 degrees), have filled a niche like trout in colder 45- to 65-degree waters. They even co-exist with trout on the lower, warmer sections of trout streams, although they usually don't grow large in coldwater streams.

Protection, Food, and Comfort

I've always emphasized to my fly-fishing school students and audiences that it is as important to know how the fish you target lives in a stream as it is to rig your tackle, choose a fly, cast, and present a fly. Here are some important stream behavior characteristics of smallmouth bass that can help you locate and catch fish.

Like any other fish, smallmouth live where they can find the best combination of protection, food, and comfort. They are comfortable in slower currents. They prefer to ambush, intercept, or chase foods—in that order. They prefer hard, clean structure, like gravel and rubble, and because they like shade, they seek out ledge rock, boulders, stumps, and logs rather than dense leafy aquatic vegetation, mud, or sand. Usually the coarser the structure, the more large smallmouth are attracted to it. Boulders from the size of a 55-gallon drum to a Volkswagen Beetle are best. If they can't find overhead shading structure, they'll lie behind or just beside the structure. They are less territorial than wild trout that occupy similar places; usually they congregate in groups of 3 to 25.

When smallmouth swim onto shallow shorelines or pool tailouts, it's usually during evening, night, or early morning. They hunt minnows, crayfish, and insects. When a gang of hungry, prowling smallmouth jumps a school of minnows, pandemonium breaks out as the fish make wild, noisy, splashy, zigzagging dashes right at the bank. When you see this, put a minnow streamer or surface bug like a pencil popper or Waker Sheep Minnow just ahead of the splashes. The smallies will often hit immediately.

Because smallmouth prefer to eat large foods, dry flies and nymphs that imitate small (#16 and smaller) hatching insects usually are not good choices. However, when good numbers of #4-#14 insects (White Flies, for example) are on the water, that's a different story. I've also found that unless the emerging flies are #10 or bigger, it's best to use a nymph.

Hatches are also opportunities to catch big smallmouth on minnow imitations, especially surface-diving designs like Marabou Muddler Minnows, Waker Sheep Minnows, and Dahlberg Divers. These crafty older fish wait for their preferred prey of smaller bass, chubs, shiners, and perch to begin feeding happily on the hatching bugs. While the little guys gobble insects at the surface, the demon bass make swift, easy attacks from below. That's exactly what was happening when Emily caught her big smallie during the Quetico caddis hatch. The caddis were appetizers for the bass until an easy sunfish main course came along.

Smallmouth will also attack hooked smaller bass, chubs, perch, and sunfish as you bring them in. When you see a bass chase your catch, bring the small fish in quickly, release it, and cast again to the area of the attack. You may get an instant hookup with a much larger bass.

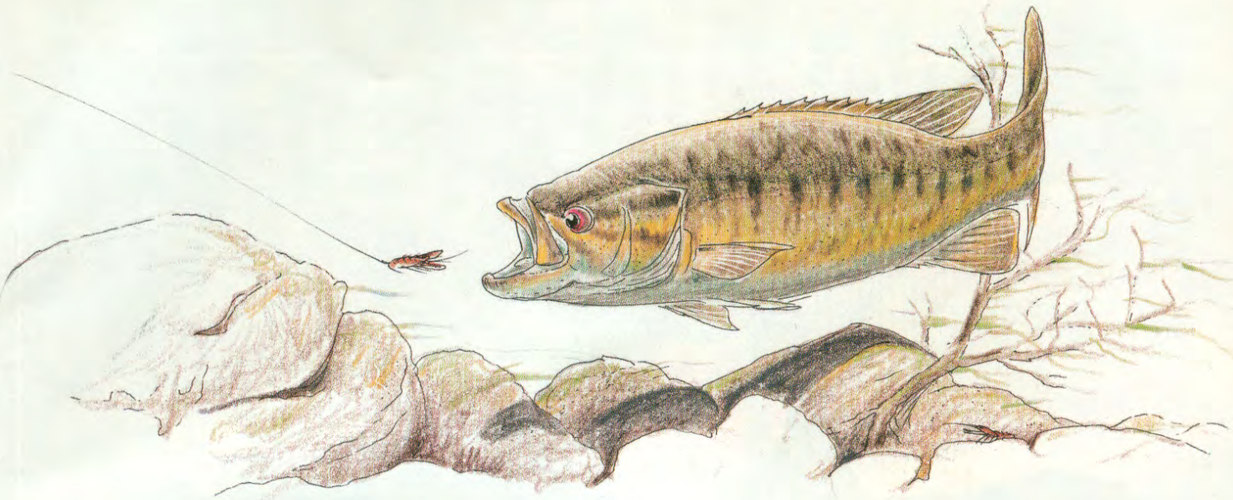
Whitlock's Deep Sheep Chub Minnow

DAVID J. SIEGFRIED PHOTOS

Dave's Orange-belly Diving Frog

DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

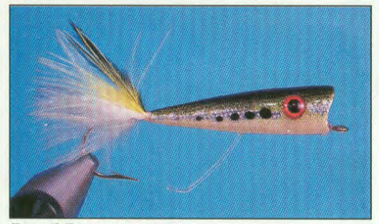
Smallmouth grow fat on a diet of crayfish, minnows, leeches, and other foods. Because smallmouth prefer to eat large foods, dry flies and nymphs that imitate small (#16 and smaller) hatching insects usually are not good choices.



Use sinking-tip lines to crawl minnow, frog, and crayfish imitations along bottom in areas where smallmouth can find food, protection, and comfort. Dave Whitlock illustration.

Whitlock's Deep Sheep Golden Shiner

Whitlock's Nearnuff Crayfish



Pencil Popper

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Whitlock's Fruit Cocktail Bug

DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

Poppers and patterns with rubber legs are deadly on smallmouth bass attracted by any movement that signals potential prey.

Sometimes smallmouth can be downright indifferent, refusing to hit any fly. If you know that a spot has a concentration of bass, do whatever you can to hook even a small bass, sunfish, or perch in the area. The action of the hooked fish seems to excite every smallmouth within seeing or hearing range, and the show begins.

I've witnessed this phenomenon many times, but one instance on Arkansas's Crooked Creek in summer illustrates the point perfectly. A large fallen tree at the lower end of a long, shallow pool always produced one or two bass and sunfish for me. I couldn't believe it when one day I fished the area and caught nothing. So I quietly finned my WaterMaster kickboat to the submerged tree and peered into the clear water around the limbs and roots. There bass, rock bass, sunfish, and suckers were thick under the cover. Every fish in the 75-yard pool must have been crowded into the shade of that tree.

I backed off and went to the opposite shore to think about the situation. The fish were obviously spooky and tucked deep beneath the tree, away from the midday sun. My surface fly and fly line had either spooked them or had not tempted them from their hideout.

I rested the spot for 15 minutes, then made a cast and soft presentation with a worm imitation rigged to sink down to the fish. It only took about two seconds for the worm to reach bottom and convince a rock bass to eat. I set the hook and worked the fish away from the tree. Eight or ten bass, all red-eyed with excitement, followed. I freed the rock bass, quickly tied on a brown NearNuff Crayfish, and cast again. A big smallmouth immediately inhaled the fake crayfish. By the time the action ended, I'd landed seven smallmouth

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between 8 and 18 inches long, a 20-inch largemouth bass, three more rock bass, some green sunfish, and one big sucker—all from beneath the tree cover.

The first rock bass had flipped the switch to wake up the other fish and start a fantastic episode. The lesson: Do whatever it takes to get that first fish on and excite indifferent smallmouth into feeding.

Seasons of the Smallmouth

USUALLY SMALLMOUTH FISHING is best from late April to early November. Unlike trout, smallmouth don't take flies if the water is colder than about 45 degrees, especially if the water temperature is falling. During these times, I fish for other species.

Springtime prespawn smallmouth are hungry and aggressive and constantly prowling for food. The best areas to find them have relatively warmer water and abundant food. Usually that's in the riffles and runs and at the pool flats and tailouts.

During spawning, when the waters are 60 to 68 degrees, male bass in streams build a nest in a gravelly area where the water is two to three feet deep and has a relatively slow flow. If there is a ledge rock, large boulder, stump, or sunken log nearby, that's the prime spot. The male viciously strikes anything that comes near the nest. When the female shows up and deposits eggs, she also becomes defensive and lashes out at intruding flies. After the eggs are laid, they are vulnerable to being eaten by smaller fish, especially if the adult is caught and pulled off the nest. In the best interest of sportsmanship and future quality smallmouth-bass fishing, please refrain from fishing to nesting fish.

After spawning, smallmouth are tired and spent. They head for deep structures and slower water to rest for a couple of weeks. Later, they resume active feeding from late evening through the night to early morning. Look for them mostly in slow riffles and runs.

In summer, when streams are low and warm during the day, smallmouth often move into pools and hold along deep shady banks, ledges, big boulders, or fallen tree trunks. In low light, they move to the perimeter of the pool, the tailout, or riffles to eat.

With cooler fall weather and rains, the fish move back into the runs and riffles until the water becomes cold, then it's back to the deepest slow-water structures they can find until winter passes.

It's difficult to catch smallies in win-

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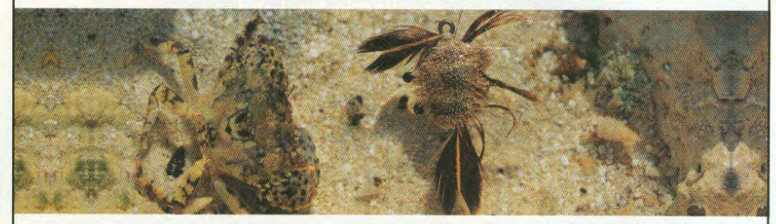

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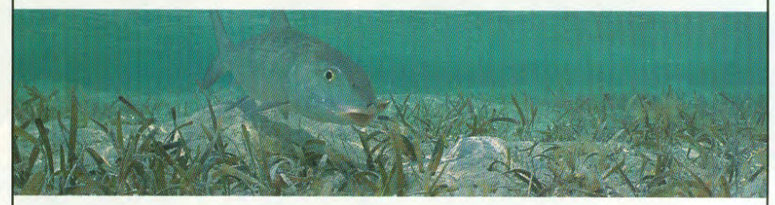

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ter, but if you must, use a stealthy approach, long careful casts, long light tippets, and small (#6-#14) flies fished slow and on bottom. Fish from late morning until midafternoon on sunny days when the temperature might come up a few degrees. In the cold, clear waters of late fall and winter, smallmouth are twice as spooky as they are in spring and summer, so don't press them with heavy-handed techniques. Other good locations to try include power plant outflows and the mouths of urban streams, where warmer water enters a main stream. Carry a thermometer in winter to find the warmest water.

DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

Smallmouth like this one caught by Emily Whitlock often hold near overhead cover. Flies that make noise draw the fish from their hiding place.

Smallmouth Fly Tackle

LIKE TROUT, SMALLMOUTH BASS can be caught with 1- to 8-weight outfits. The size of the outfit you use depends on your skills, the fish size, and the flies you use. A 6- or 7-weight outfit works best because it can cast the most appropriate flies—#4 to #12 drys, nymphs, terrestrials, Woolly Buggers, streamers, Clouser Minnows, crayfish, divers, and poppers.

I recommend an 8½-foot, medium-fast-action rod and at least two fly lines: a weight-forward bass bug taper with a 10-foot knotless 0X to 4X leader, and a Type III or IV short (5-foot) sinking-tip line with a 6-foot 1X or 2X leader. Use a single-action large-arbor reel or a multiplier reel with at least 100 yards of 20-pound Dacron backing. Match your tippet to the fly's size and weight. I find 0X to 4X fluorocarbon material is most useful.

Lines. The floating bass-bug line is my workhorse. I can use it to present almost all my smallmouth flies, includ-

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ing bushy drys, bass bugs, shallow divers, swimmers, nymphs, and bottom crawlers. I recommend the 6- or 7-weight Teeny Pro-Series Whitlock Bass Bug Line, which I designed especially for stream smallmouth bass fishing, but other brands of bass bug lines work well, too.

A Type III or IV sinking-tip line with a 5-foot sinking tip casts beautifully and allows me to fish floating flies at the surface, or as deep-diving swimmers. A relatively slow retrieve without jerking keeps the fly near the surface. To make the flies dive and swim below the surface, let the line sink, then retrieve it with a sharp line strip to pull the fly under. With practice, you can fish the fly at a range of depths from a few inches to a few feet below the surface. It's fantastic to cast into tight bank structure and fish the fly at whatever level you wish as you work it out from the bank.

Sinking-tip lines are available with 5- to 30-foot sinking tips. You can buy 5-foot sinking-tips (or multitip lines with sinking tips) or simply cut back standard 10- or 12-foot sinking-tip lines. Put loops on the excess line and use it as a spare sinking-tip or shooting taper.

A short sinking-tip line is superior at keeping a weighted streamer swimming across or upcurrent at a level deeper than can be done with a floating line. When combined with bottom crawlers like NearNuff Crayfish, NearNuff Sculpins, Clouser Minnows, and Deep Sheep Minnows, this presentation seems to catch more smallmouth than the same flies fished with a floating line.

I once thought the bottom-hopping or jigging action of these lead-eye flies triggered smallmouth to take, but experience has taught me that crawling the flies along the bottom really excites the smallmouth into greedily gobbling the fly. Even inexperienced bass fishermen can improve their catch rate by using sinking-tips to crawl the flies along bottom.

Leaders. For floating lines, use a 10-foot knotless 0X to 4X leader. For sinking-tip lines, use a 4- to 6-foot knotless leader (including tippet). A knotless fluorocarbon leader is great, as is a 4-foot Umpqua sinking-line monofilament leader, with 24 inches of fluorocarbon tippet. A drop of Zap-A-Gap glue on the tippet's double surgeon knot ensures 100 percent knot strength between the two different materials.

When smallmouth are consistently taking small foods, I use lighter 3- to 5-weight outfits for the pleasure of the extra rod sensitivity. Don't use such light outfits with medium to large (#4-#1/0) bass bugs and streamers, especially if the water you fish holds trophy smallmouth.

THE BEST SMALLMOUTH RIVERS

- **Ozark Mountain streams:** Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma.
- **Umpqua River:** Oregon.
- **Quetico Provincial Park rivers:** Ontario, Canada.
- **Texas hill country streams:** Texas.
- **John Day River:** Oregon.
- **St. Croix River:** Maine and New Brunswick, Canada.
- **New River:** Virginia.
- **Cumberland River:** Kentucky.
- **Penobscot River:** Maine.
- **St Croix River:** Wisconsin.
- **Susquehanna River:** Pennsylvania.
- **Potomac River:** West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia.
- **Shenandoah River:** Virginia.

DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

Smallmouth thrive in many rivers across the country. Use weight-forward floating and 5-foot sinking-tip lines and 0X-4X leaders.

Lighter rods don't have the backbone needed to set large hooks in the smallmouth's tough mouth. Big fish bite down so hard on the large, bushy, big-hooked flies that a 5-weight or lighter outfit will not have the stiffness needed to overcome their bite grip and set the hook into their tough old jaws. One open-jawed, head-shaking leap could send the fly catapulting back to you.

Nymphing in Streams

NYMPHING WITH FLOATING LINES, long knotless leaders, and strike indicators to detect subtle takes is a deadly smallmouth technique. Use the same techniques (upstream or high-sticking across stream) as for stream trout; they are especially good in clear, colder streams with abundant aquatic insects. Use the same rig you would for trout—weighted nymphs or nymphs and split-shot, a yarn or foam floating indicator, and a stout 4X or stronger tippet. Drift the flies naturally downstream through the stream's deepest riffles and runs.

Sight fishing with nymphs is also an especially effective technique in clear rivers. Sink the nymph to the bass's level and drift it to its nose. Then animate the fly a little with several short twitches. Often the bass will snatch it.

Several years ago, Emily and I fished smallmouth in August on the Umpqua River, about 30 miles below Roseburg, Oregon. The water was low and clear and we could see big smallmouth holding eight to ten feet down around lava ledges and giant boulders in runs and pools. They didn't show much interest in deeply retrieved Clouser Minnows, various leeches, or crayfish, but they found our heavily weighted bead-head, rubber-legged, Red Fox Squirrel Hair Nymphs irresistible. We put the flies right on their nose and had a ball.

I've had frequent successes sight-nymphing to Ozark smallmouth. The technique works well in any smallmouth water that is clear enough to see bass. Like trout, smallmouth probably eat nymphs most consistently when aquatic insects are about to begin their emer-

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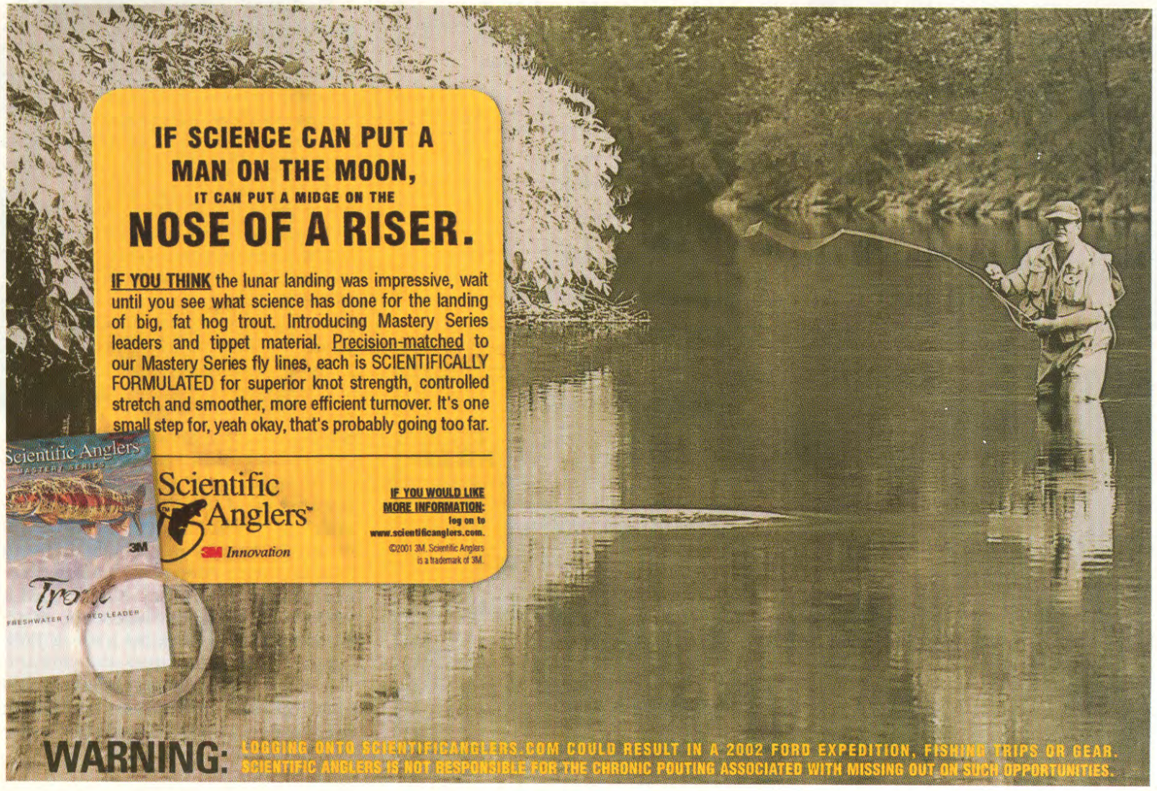

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gence. However, if there is not a #14 or larger nymph hatching, explore the water with stonefly or dobsonfly (hellgrammite) nymphs. I've had consistently good nymphing with these two aquatic insects. I also recommend my reliable bead-head Red Fox Squirrel Hair Nymph (#2-#10), with or without rubber legs. It looks a little like many of the smallmouth's favorite foods—stonefly and mayfly nymphs, caddis pupae, and crayfish.

Flies for Smallmouth

YOU NEED FOUR TYPES OF FLIES for smallmouth: surface flies like poppers and bugs, diving flies that imitate injured minnows and frogs, swimming flies that imitate baitfish and nymphs, and bugs that move enticingly on the bottom and imitate crayfish and other foods. These flies must be the correct size and color, and it helps if they make sounds in the water.

Fly Size. Smallmouth generally eat larger foods than trout of the same size. Flies ranging in size from #4 to #12 work best, but I have also seen 6- to 7-inch-long Big Pike Divers work magically on 2- to 5-pound smallmouth. An exception to using large flies is during aquatic insect hatches when smallmouth, like trout, respond best to good imitations that match the naturals, or are one size larger.

Fly Color. Brown and orange are the two most popular colors for smallmouth flies, probably because smallmouth like to eat crayfish so much. However, smallmouth have two color preferences.

First, in clear waters, natural colors that imitate the most abundant foods work best. Second, highly visible colors work well. Bass feed primarily by sight. When the water is stained or turbid, as well as in low light, black or fluorescent colors are usually more productive than the more somber natural camouflage colors that resemble live nymphs, minnows, and other foods. Yellow and chartreuse are effective bright colors.

My favorite smallmouth surface hair-bug color pattern is the WhitHair Bug in a fruit cocktail color scheme. This pattern is a combination of orange, fluorescent orange, fluorescent yellow, fluorescent green, bright red, and black. They've gotta be blind not to see this fly well. Another favorite highly visible smallmouth fly is my Orange-bellied Diving Frog tied with fluorescent orange, fluorescent green, and black. I developed it while living in Maine, where the smallmouth streams usually have a Jack Daniel's-whiskey color.

It is also important to enhance fly visibility by using reflective materials in combination with hi-viz materials. A few strands of Krystal Flash or Flashabou can make a difference. Other good hi-viz color combinations for smallmouth are red and white; red and yellow; black and silver; or pearl, chartreuse, and gold, all of which work well anywhere the water is stained brown, green, or turquoise by minerals or tannin.

Fly Sounds. No matter what color you choose, a fly is usually more effective if it also produces high- and low-frequency sound waves when you present it. Smallmouth, like all other fish, have two highly efficient sound-detecting systems—an inner ear in their head to detect high-frequency sounds and a lateral line along their body to detect low-frequency sounds. Your flies need to make noise because the smallmouth are often next to or in structure that restricts their ability to see a fly.

Flies with spinners have always been effective on stream smallmouth because they produce both high- and low-frequency sound waves and reflect a lot of light from the fly to the bass. Spinners the size of a dime to a nickel in silver or gold finishes work nicely on any straight-eye streamer hook. Examples of flies you can add spinners to include Woolly Buggers, Woolly Worms, Zonkers, Muddlers, Clousers, and Sheep Minnows.

Surface bugs and divers can make attractive struggling-prey sounds if they are popped or bubble chained (pulled under the surface sharply to leave a trail, or chain, of bubbles). Streamers or leeches with rattles are also effective. Lead-eyed bottom-crawling streamers like crayfish, Woolly Buggers, hare grubs, and Clouser Minnows all knock or tap on the stream bottom and attract bass.

Flies like the Muddler Minnow, Hare Water Pup, Mouse Rat, Dahlberg Diver, WhitHair Bug, Woolly Bugger, Waker Sheep Minnow, and Matuka Sculpin have bulky heads or bodies that emit realistic, low-frequency vibrations when animated with erratic line strips during a retrieve. These are especially effective if you give them erratic, panicked movements by varying the speed of the retrieve and adding sharp line pulls. Such changes in sound intensity tell a predator that its prey is either in distress or busily feeding, and so is more vulnerable or unsuspecting of an attack. That's when the demon smallmouth goes in for the kill.

DAVE WHITLOCK operates Dave & Emily Whitlock's Fly Fishing Schools. For information, contact him at www.davewhitlock.com or (888) 962-4576. He lives in the Ozark Mountains near Mountain Home, Arkansas.

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bass bugs, and streamers. Whiting's **American Hackle** is exceptionally wide, soft, and webbed—very desirable for tying a 10-inch-long baitfish fly or a #1/0 Purple Spey. The feathers are radically different from dry-fly hackle, but the selection strategy and genetics involved are the same.

Whiting Farms also has a full line of specialty products, including Jungle Fowl, an endangered jungle pheasant used for tying Atlantic salmon flies, and Coc-de-Leon, a chicken that produces a speckled feather perfect for tailing dry flies or for wings and collars on wet flies like the Matuka or Comet.

Based on the developmental trend and on samples Tom Whiting had at the 2000 Fly Tying Symposium in Somerset, New Jersey, consumers can look forward to even higher quality hackle available next year.

How He Does It. Dr. Whiting says breeding chickens to produce better hackle than the previous generations is a "numbers game." He produces 125,000 chickens per year, and every bird is inspected and "flagged" if it is considered a potential breeder. Whiting himself sometimes looks at more than 900 flagged chickens per day when the stock matures, and selects only about 1½ percent of the candidates as potential breeding stock. He writes a 3-page report on each of these birds, collects feather samples, and turns the data over to his head grader, John Schaper, for a second opinion. Schaper has a checklist of more than 80 attributes he looks for in a feather sample—qualities like feather length and symmetry, barb density and stiffness, and quill quality, among others. Schaper ties flies with every sample and writes an exhaustive evaluation that, with Dr. Whiting's report, determines the next generation of breeders.

This extreme selection pressure—less than .2 percent of the chickens inspected become breeders—results in dramatic improvements to the next generation. Dr. Whiting says there's nothing magical about it. If you look through enough birds and practice extremely critical appraisals, you will eventually end up with better fly-tying hackle. Genetic advancements are always a result of this selection process, coupled with excellent husbandry to allow them to express their genetic potential.

The Other Players

WHILE DR. WHITING has produced the most dramatic genetic advancements in dry-fly hackle in the world today, there are many other companies out there with attractively priced genetic hackle to fill many needs. As one hackle breeder says, "Whiting hackle is fine hackle, but it's not twice as good as mine, and mine is half the price."

Most hackle producers (including Whiting) claim their product is the most economical on a per-fly basis, but because of the inherent complexity of this claim, and the vagaries of individual tiers, an objective study is beyond the scope of this article.

Metz. Bucky Metz sold his operation to Umpqua Feather Merchants in 1995, and Rick Dailey was entrusted with the care and progression of the flock. Because of what Hoffman and Whiting had accomplished with saddle hackles, Dailey had to play catch-up in the saddle hackle department. Ten years ago, "dry-

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HACKLE MANUFACTURERS

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www.whitingfarms.com

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