

*here for the fishing*



## Hunting Canoe Country Smallmouth

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□ by *Stuart Osthoff*

“Smallmouth canoe trip” has claimed the past 15 Memorial Day weekends on my calendar. Powerful testimony of just how gut-hooked for life I am on canoe country’s most engaging style of fishing.

Late May typically finds northcountry shorelines warming past 55° and the smallmouth bass moving in to spawn. Top end trophy females come in only briefly to deposit their eggs before drifting back out deeper to recuperate. Catching them on the beds is a timing crapshoot and probably a blessing for conservation of the fishery.

Most of the fast and furious action comes courtesy of the 2-4 pound scrappy males who select, build and guard the nests with an aggressive attack-mode attitude. They actually eat very little while on nursery duty, striking mostly out of territorial instinct. Even if you arrive to find the beds empty, fear not. These 16" to 18" males will be lurking nearby, catching up by feeding aggressively all through June. All of which sets up a prime time topwater bass scenario across the BWCAW and Quetico.

It’s no secret fly rodders target this window of opportunity with reverence. Many who have fished the world’s most hallowed waters consider canoe country the ultimate smallmouth destination. What is not so widely recognized is how spinning rod anglers can match or surpass the topwater thrills experienced by avid fly fishermen. I often partner with

fly anglers while clinging stubbornly to my crankbait casting ways. The bottom line is we do more than coexist in a canoe. We actually thrive together while helping each other capture the priceless rewards of wilderness smallmouth fishing. Here’s how you can enjoy the same.

Peter and I have hooked up on previous smallmouth forays, finding good fly rod action for 12-15" fish. While landing no lunkers, these trips developed the teamwork, tactics and tackle needed to understand the how, when and where of taking smallies on top. Outings that prepared us for bigger and better things someday. Someday is today.

We pull out all the stops on this trip. Four full days to fish a “hot tip” lake during prime time. We are told Peter should crack that elusive 20" barrier on the fly right here. Earlier this morning we caught the tow across Basswood, paddled up to U.S. Point where we made camp and rigged up our rods.

With high expectations we portage into a nameless Quetico lake to tackle the smallmouth challenge.

### **The Essence of the Game**

The unique appeal of topwater bass in canoe country comes from the intensely visual nature of the game. No fixation on electronic display screens on these trips. Early season surface fishing for

smallmouth is all about reading the shoreline habitat with your own eyeballs (polarized glasses help). Spotting and stalking big game with a bow and arrow is my first love, so it’s no mystery why hunting smallmouth in the shallows is my favorite flavor of canoe country fishing.

The bow angler, whether throwing dry flies or plastic plugs, must constantly scrutinize every nook and cranny along the rugged, rocky shorelines. The perpetual challenge is to first spot every productive bronzeback lair, and then cast to it before the canoe glides into the fish’s detection zone.

These fish are aggressive but not suicidal. You have to stalk in without spooking them and quickly determine the optimum spot to pin point your fly/lure. Even sculling along slowly, the angler will likely have only one to two casts to hit the sweetspot before being busted. The more opportunities you can nail with a bulls-eye cast, the more good fish you’ll move in a given day or trip.

Trolling deep for walleyes or lake trout is a wonderful sportfishing challenge with its own rewards. The tremendous power of a 40" lake trout on light tackle remains my single greatest canoe country angling thrill. And finally getting into a run of big walleyes after days of scheming and dreaming is great fun too. But for raw, heart-pounding high intensity

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action—smallmouth on the surface transcends these bottom dwelling species.

Everything is right there for both the angler and guide/paddler to see and savor: the anticipation as the canoe approaches a prime bass holding pocket; the flight, splash-down and action of the fly/lure; the emotional rush of the strike; the snap of the line across the surface as the hook is set. All culminating with an aerial battle that screams, "Look at that fish fight." Combine this captivating style of sportfishing with a spectacular wilderness setting and the toil with pack and paddle to get here becomes a small price to pay.

### What to Look for on New Water

Peter leads off as I paddle clockwise around this 100 acre ultra-clear gem. First we look for those 2-3' golden ovals finned clear in sand/gravel/boulders in 3-8' of water. Today we quickly confirm the early spring (2006) has the spawn ahead of schedule. There are few fish on the beds. Whenever you do find fish on the nests, stay back and throw your dry fly right on top of it. If they don't come up and take it, a black Woolly Bugger stripped through the nest is a lock to get whacked. I like to throw crankbaits ten feet beyond the nest, letting the initial plop dissipate before moving the plug over the nest.

Since it is clear we won't be nest fishing on this trip, we start working the shoreline cover. With experience, you'll learn to recognize the prime spots. You can't fish everything, here is what to focus on.

Even tiny creeks spilling in from some hidden beaver pond attract minnows and feeding bass. Patches of pencil reeds are also minnow magnets. Any fallen tree in the water is classic smallmouth cover. Lakes in the BWCAW's 1999 big blowdown zone are now full of great bass habitat.

Every canoe country bass lake will have the occasional toppled tree. A big bushy conifer can harbor a school of fish. A beaver-stripped aspen may only hold a single bass, but it might be a bruiser. Always fish the brushy tops in deeper waters on your first casts. Bigger fish usually claim the preferred deeper water hideouts. Then move in to fish the trunk and branches closer to shore. You want a crack at those bigger fish before moving in too close and spooking them.

As productive as vegetation/timber can be for smallmouth, the mainstay of their diet in canoe country is crayfish, and crayfish live in rocky cover—the sharp, jumbled, impossible to walk through variety. I've seen rocky shorelines literally come alive with crayfish at dusk. The bass are never far away.

Crayfish dart into the rock crevices to escape marauding bass. Skip over smooth Canadian bedrock. Basketball sized boulders are also good smallmouth feeding areas. Even car-sized glacial erratics well away from shore can hold a bass or two.

### **Break Through Bay**

As I ease the Bell into a football field size bay, Peter and I whisper in unison, "Wow, this stretch looks really bassy." The entire U is rimmed with rocky rubble, highlighted by perhaps a dozen little pockets cut into the shoreline. All day a walleye chop has swept windblown tree pollen into these sweetspots, transforming the gin clear water into a mysterious golden slurry. A bit offshore we can see the clear, pollen-free water plunge over 20 feet, perfect security cover where bass can escape prowling pike. The sun has just settled onto the treetops, and it's calm and quiet. My fleece jacket feels cozy on this cool June evening.

An old weathered-gray white pine snag juts out in front of the first pollen pocket. No branches, just a clean two-foot thick log. Peter bounces his chartreuse deer hair Dahlberg Diver off the log, and it settles onto the pollen scum. You wouldn't think a bass could even see up through that stuff.

As Peters strips the line, the Dahlberg slurps, bubbles and glides forward about a foot and a half. Peter pauses for the count of three then strips, slurps and glides through another sequence. WHAM. The front half of a glistening bronzeback rolls over the Dahlberg, and Peter hammers the hook home with his 9 weight. The bend in the rod indicates this is a good fish.

The bass dives for the log but Peter steers him clear, out into the open deeper water. After several bulldog runs to the right, then back left, the fish clears the water with a head-shaking two-foot leap. "WHOA!" This could be the one. I spin the canoe sideways and grab the net. Lifting his rod high, Peter scoots him into the hoop and I swing him aboard.

Peter twists around in the bow seat to watch as I put the tape to the hefty fish. "Welcome to the 20" club" I announce. I hand the net with the fish up to Peter and ready the camera. Peter extracts the Dahlberg with a forceps, and I get the happy angler shots. The trophy pressure is off. Everything is gravy now.

Peter hooks, battles and admires another 15 fish in the little bay. A couple are small but most are 16 inchers but two are 18 inchers, and the last fish off the point is 20 1/2 inches. Two trophies our first night out. How sweet is that?

### **All Day Action**

Overnight it drops to a chilly 40°. During mid-summer it pays to beat the heat and get out fishing before sun up. Not today. During early season it's best to let the sun warm things up a few hours before heading out. While mid-day thermals can stir up big open water, it's a rarity when we can't get back in a protected bay and find good action from 10 to noon and after lunch.

Today we are back on what we have dubbed "Dahlberg Lake" by 9:30. The bright day is warming up quickly, so I head to the east end where on-shore trees give morning shade to those prime rocky pockets.

Peter is right handed, so I paddle him clockwise around the lake, making for an easier straight overhand throw. (Counterclockwise forces backhand casts causing less accuracy and faster fatigue.) When fly casters make hundreds of casts a day from awkward sitting positions in a canoe, it pays to position the craft at the optimal angle/distance as much as possible.

Nearly every bassy looking blowdown, rock and deeper shoreline pocket (6-10') produces a rush of adrenaline and a lively encounter. Peter is having a great time. These fish average 16" with many going 17 or 18". All battle hard before being released to the cool clear waters.

After lunch and a nap, the sun is high overhead so we switch positions and fish up the western shore where shady shoreline nooks are now appearing. I launch a Heddon Baby Torpedo (frog color) towards the likely looking spots. Spinning rodders can stay back from the bass lairs a bit more than fly rodders; it's easier to make longer 20-yard casts. This helps when midday bright conditions more readily spook fish.

I don't move a lot of fish, so I start casting more parallel to shore along the main breakline into deeper water. I pick up half a dozen 16" to 18" fish and several smaller ones before the sun and wind wear us down. Based on last night, we head back to camp, grill some steaks and potatoes and anticipate another awesome evening.

Tonight I paddle Peter along King's Point of Basswood, new water with seemingly endless coastline of bass habitat to work. But of course, there isn't time to fish it all. So I move the canoe along at a steady pace, forcing Peter to hit only the choicest targets. This is the wonderful attraction of hunting smallmouth, the anticipation and immediate verdict of bass or no bass from under one log or rock after another.

Sometimes we see a wake or even the fish itself burst from the cover to engulf the Dahlberg.



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Other times a loud sucking sound disrupts our daydreaming as the fly disappears. Some bass inhale the bug, like an invisible vacuum cleaner, without a ripple.

Peter agrees to split the prime time evening shift and takes over the stern seat. I load up a #9 Rapala Skitter Pop and start winging it with long arching casts. This lure floats like most other balsa wood Rapala minnow imitations, but it also has a plastic cup up front. By twitching or pulling the rod tip (6 lb line), I can make it swim, skip, gurgle or pop. Like the Dahlberg Diver deer hair bug, the Skitter Pop catches fish by attracting them with sound, focusing their attention with motion and closing the deal with a frog or crayfish-like appearance.

I got on a furious run where just about every cast got smacked. Some fish missed the Skitter Pop, and I muffed a few hook sets but there was never a dull moment for a solid hour of cranking.

### Teamwork is Critical

To effectively fly fish from a canoe, you need a stern paddler controlling the watercraft while the angler casts from the bow. By keeping the canoe mostly parallel to shore, the casts will be across the bow out of harm's way. To be safe, I

wear a hat and sunglasses. I haven't been impaled yet.

Even the most hard-core fly caster will need a break every few hours. That's the time to switch positions and let your partner fish. The beautiful thing about surface fishing canoe country smallmouth, whether with a fly or surface plug, is its almost as much fun to watch as it is to do the fishing. The paddler has to study the shoreline cover and position the canoe accordingly for the most productive cast. I get bored trolling for walleyes and lake trout down deep where you can only feel what's going on. (Personally, I don't like using electronics.) With smallmouth on top, it's all there for you to see, strategize and work through.

The teamwork element is important for more than catching fish. First off, you both have to paddle and portage your way into the backcountry. The sweat equity demanded to reach the best backcountry fishing is a bonding process. When it's your turn to fish, without having to worry about canoe control, you'll really appreciate the efforts of a good partner. By investing in each other's fishing time and success, the level of satisfaction transcends anything you can do by yourself.



*The featherlight landing of a Dahlberg Diver deer hair bass fly can outfish anything when the bronzebacks set up in shallow water.*

I know diehard walleye anglers who consider small-mouth nothing more than bait stealing pests. And I hasten to add, nothing can touch a walleye in the fry pan. But I don't lay awake on cold January nights thinking about eating fish. I relish those special days, when after 40 miles of paddling and a dozen rough portages, I can hunt, cast to and battle big bronzebacks. No canoe country species can match the intensity of small-mouth action on the surface.

#### **Catch and Release Ethic**

No "how to" article on catching trophy sized wilderness smallmouth can conclude without a plea for conserving this priceless fishery. Despite their non-native status in canoe country, smallmouth are the

dream fish of many who come here—the driving force in their appreciation and stewardship of this unique wilderness. A healthy respect for this amazing fish, and those who love hunting them, is definitely in order.

A mature 18" canoe country smallmouth could be 10 to 12 years old, a 20" trophy is perhaps 15 years old. They grow slowly and not at all in lean stressful years. Fortunately, they are a very hearty species; you can take your time playing them, and still release them with very little stress. In 15+ years of canoe country smallmouth fishing with flies and topwater plugs, my partners and I have killed next to zero bass. Many Boundary Waters lakes can handle some

harvest, but if you must kill any bass limit your stringer to fish under 15". Release all those mature breeding sized fish. Bigger fish are the most experienced and successful spawners. They are the key to sustaining a healthy population in these waters.

Most smallmouth lakes also have walleye, so I pack some deeper running crankbaits or jigs with Gulp to rustle up a fish fry. Big smallmouth taken on top in the shallows on light tackle are way too much fun to catch and kill. Let them go to fight another day. After all, when you find your own canoe country hot spots, you're going to want to return. Again and again!

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