

From Bobbers to Bass

By Sue Hansen



WOMEN FALL 2004
IN THE
OUTDOORS



As far as fishing goes, I've never considered myself a fanatic, though I do think it's a fun way to relax. I've never minded if the fish weren't biting, something incomprehensible to those seriously hooked on the sport. I guess my apathy toward any casting challenge is linked to how I was lured to a rod and reel in the first place.

As a child, Mom used fishing as a way to get Dad to baby-sit my three sisters and me during our summers at Grand Lake, Colorado. Whenever Mom had to run errands, us girls would be paraded patriarchally down to the shoreline. There, we would sit side by side while Dad rigged up four rods with worms dangling beneath red and white bobbers. He would cast, then tell us to watch the bobber in case a fish bit the bait.

With the warm sun on my back and the soft sound of lapping water at my feet, it was easy to feel lazy and forget to look at a bouncing bobber. Those who snooze always lose, so I never experienced the excitement of reeling in a fish.

All that changed 40 years later when my husband, Eric, took me smallmouth bass fishing on the New River in West Virginia. Guided by Greg Cook of North American River Runners, I soon learned that catching bass was more than just a sport; it was a way of life.

This is a whole new ball game, Cook said. Pound for pound, you'll be pulling in the top freshwater fighting fish in North America.

Cook, who sensed my sudden nervousness that my mediocre fishing skills would be put to the test against such a formidable game fish, assured me that he would coach me in the art of attracting smallmouth bass. His confidence and patience were all I needed to net a new outdoor passion.

Sitting in a raised chair in the stern of his rubber bass boat, Cook rowed out into the New River's calm currents. This 250-mile-long nationally protected river is thought to be the oldest stretch of water in the United States (formed 65 million years ago) and the second oldest in the world after the Nile. It has long

been rated as one of the top 10 smallmouth bass rivers in the country. It seemed a privilege to be angling for my first bass on such an ancient river system.

Floating along the best fishing section of the river according to Cook, we spent the day boating between the communities of Sandstone and Meadow Creek in southern West Virginia. Feeling clumsy with spin casting — Cook had to untangle my line several times — I managed to drop my artificial lure near rocky areas in the river or in pools beneath the tree-lined shore, where bass seek shelter or shade. Keeping a tight drag in my line while reeling in, I held my breath and waited for a bite.

Having the right fishing equipment is an advantage for bass fishermen, especially beginners. A lightweight rod and reel makes it easier to cast for long periods of time. My casting arm never got tired, and I could feel subtle strikes because smallmouths don't always aggressively lunge at a lure. Sometimes instead of



charging prey, bass take a slower approach, sucking the food in as opposed to swallowing it quickly. Either way, I had to be ready to set the hook hard if the line jerked.

It didn't take long for that to happen. Bass have excellent eyesight and if enticed with their favorite foods like crayfish and leeches, aerial action will explode from the water. Cook told me what to expect, but I was still surprised at the powerful surge breaking the water's surface as my fish did an airborne cartwheel in an attempt to throw my hook. Splashing back down, it was a battle of the captive and the captor. The victor would be the one who fought more vigorously.

It would be me, as I refused to let that bass break away. Bringing it to the boat, I became aware of a

high-pitched sound coming from the stern. It was me; I had been screaming. I've got one over and over. Though embarrassed at my outburst, I was elated as Cook lifted up my first smallmouth bass. Though it wasn't even close to the world record of 11 pounds, 15 ounces or Cook's personal best of 6 pounds, my small smallmouth was a trophy to me.

Looking at the mouthy, spiny-finned fish, I realized why Dad wanted me to watch that bobber years ago. To have a tug of war with an aquatic animal that

Small talk on smallmouths

Known for its aerial acrobatics and strong will, the smallmouth bass has a well-deserved reputation as the fightingest freshwater game fish. After a smallmouth strikes, it usually makes a sizzling run for the surface, does a cartwheel in an attempt to throw the hook, and then wages a dogged battle in deep water.

The smallmouth bass was originally found mainly in the eastern United States. Its range extended from northern Minnesota to southern Quebec on the north, and from northern Georgia to eastern Oklahoma on the south. It was not found east of the Appalachians. But owing to its tremendous popularity, the smallmouth has been widely stocked and is now found in every state with the exceptions of Florida, Louisiana and Alaska. It also has been stocked in most Canadian provinces and in Asia, Africa, Europe and South America.

For more information on bass fishing in West Virginia, contact Greg Cook at North American River Runners at 800-950-2585 or send him an e-mail at Greg@NARR.com.

weighs 140 pounds less than I do is simply amazing.

After staring at my smallmouth for a few seconds, Cook gently returned the bass to the water and set it free. Though sad that I couldn't keep it, I understood the need to catch and release in this section of the New River. Twelve miles of the waterway has been designated as catch and release, a technique that gives fish a chance to mature into breeders — it takes six years for a bass to get big enough to reproduce — and

allows ample opportunity for people like me to get hooked on the most popular freshwater fishing sport in the country.

My appetite now whet for more action, I hoped my first fish was not a fluke. But having a guide who knew where the bass bite in the New River, I was able to catch several more. Even a late afternoon rain didn't dampen my new enthusiasm on an old waterway for a spunky species of fish.

Rowing ashore, I knew I'd be back. I now had bass in my blood.

The New River and its gorge are a magical display of natural forces. The gorge remained almost inaccessible along its entire length until the railroad opened this isolated part of West Virginia in 1873. The railroad followed the riverbank and made it possible to ship coal to other parts of the world.

Towns sprang up like weeds but became ghost towns when the mines played out. In the southern stretches, farming became popular and provided its own contribution to the Southern Appalachian culture. The river, too, has served as a migration route for plants and animals, as well as people. Some of West Virginia's rarest plants are found in the area.

Today, 53 miles of this river and its gorge and 40 miles of its tributaries are preserved as New River Gorge National River, Gauley River National Recreation Area and Bluestone National Scenic River, all units of the National Park System.

