



## Favorite Smallmouth Bass Waters of Northwestern Pennsylvania

by **Darl Black** photos by the author

I have been chasing Smallmouth Bass across northwestern Pennsylvania for 50 years. This seems like it is a good time to reflect on those adventures and share my favorite Smallmouth Bass waters of northwestern Pennsylvania.

I am only addressing inland waters and excluding Lake Erie. Lake Erie is a massive fishery that deserves a review of its own.

### Conneaut Lake, Crawford County

**Stats:** 928 acres; 72 feet maximum depth; natural lake; unlimited horsepower

I started fishing Conneaut Lake in the late 1970s and quickly discovered it supported a strong population of Smallmouth Bass in addition to an array of other popular

species. This lake produced some large Smallmouth Bass in the 80s and 90s, with at least one over 8 pounds, according to the local Waterways Conservation Officer at the time. My best Smallmouth Bass so far has been 7 pounds. Unfortunately, whether it was intensive fishing pressure, changes in the lake environment, shift in forage, or other factors, the Smallmouth Bass population has declined in the past 20 years. However, I still catch (and release) my largest inland waters Smallmouth Bass each season from Conneaut Lake, just not as many as in days gone by. To fish Conneaut Lake for Smallmouth Bass, be prepared with an arsenal of baits to address weedbeds interspersed with gravel areas on the flats, hard bottom points, and rock-capped, mid-lake humps, as well as suspended topwater baits, swimbaits, spinnerbaits, jerkbaits, dropshot rigs, shaky worms, finesse jig-and-craw, blade baits, and hair jigs in your box.



This Conneaut Lake Smallmouth Bass, held by Marilyn Black, was my first Smallmouth Bass of 2020. It was caught on a tube jig in 19 feet of water on my second cast.

### Allegheny River, from Warren to Foxburg

**Stats:** 107 miles; depth varies from extreme shallows to 25 feet in dredge pools

In my early years, I occasionally visited the Allegheny River to fish from shore until one October day in 1990 when I hopped in a friend's boat for an impromptu trip. What a day! Constant action with 2- to 3-pound Smallmouth Bass. Not long afterwards, I acquired a jetboat and started enjoying Smallmouth Bass river adventures. Allegheny River bass seem to reach peak growth of about 18- to 19-inches, with a 20-inch, 4-pound Smallmouth Bass being an exceptional fish. However, current-loving Smallmouth Bass are dynamite on the end of the line. For more information, visit [www.oilregion.org](http://www.oilregion.org).

### French Creek, from Union City to Franklin

**Stats:** 78 miles; shallow stream suited for paddlecraft and wading

If you are a kayaker or wade angler, French Creek is the perfect destination stream for you. From the mid-70s to the late-90s, my wife and I routinely floated sections of French Creek. This stream is not known for big bass, but it is home to many acrobatic 8- to 14-inch bass.



I joined my friend Pete Cartwright for a short wading trip on French Creek to sample a different section of the creek.

One April day, I was standing on a sand spit near the head of a pool casting a 4-inch curly tail grub to a current seam, and I caught 27 Smallmouth Bass (each about 14 inches) on 27 casts before finally losing a fish. If you like throwing small baits on light tackle (spinners, small floating minnow plugs, tube jigs, and grubs), then you will enjoy French Creek. When planning a trip, contact Crawford County Convention and Visitor's Bureau at [www.visitcrawford.org](http://www.visitcrawford.org).

### Woodcock Creek Lake, Crawford County

**Stats:** 500 acres; 10 horsepower limit; United States Army Corps of Engineers Flood Control Impoundment

Marilyn and I started fishing Woodcock Creek Lake in 1976. The newly impounded lake exploded with Largemouth Bass and Muskellunge. Apparently, the annual severe winter drawdown and lack of desired aquatic vegetation did the Largemouth Bass population in. However, lack of Largemouth Bass-favored weeds along with ample rock and gravel bottom allowed Smallmouth Bass to fill the void. I do not believe there is a high population of Smallmouth Bass in Woodcock Creek Lake, but there are some nice specimens in the 3- to 5-pound range. During periods of clear water, we like to fish it early and late in the day with topwater baits. If storm water is held back and the lake level creeps into the shoreline brush and grass, it is swim jig time. However, if water gets a thick algae stain during late summer, we avoid the lake.

### Pymatuning Reservoir, Crawford County

**Stats:** 13,000 acres; 20 horsepower limit; Pennsylvania State Park Lake

Pymatuning Reservoir is where my Dad taught me to fish in the late 1950s. Smallmouth Bass were as 'rare as hen's teeth' in those days. Twenty years later, Marilyn and I began fishing Pymatuning Reservoir regularly for Largemouth Bass and Smallmouth Bass. It was rare to catch a Smallmouth Bass over 2 pounds. Roughly 15 years would pass before I caught a Pymatuning Smallmouth Bass over 3 pounds. Then around 2005, tournament anglers were suddenly catching numbers of Smallmouth Bass in the 2½- to 5-pound range. Pack shallow



During a mid-summer outing on Pymatuning Reservoir, Marilyn caught this Smallmouth Bass in 15 feet of water.

crankbaits, jerkbaits, chatter baits, spinnerbaits, jig-and-craw, and Ned rigs.

### Shenango River Lake, Mercer County

**Stats:** 3,560 acres; unlimited horsepower; United States Army Corps of Engineers Flood Control Impoundment

Shenango River Lake is roughly 25 miles downstream of Pymatuning Reservoir, yet the character of the two lakes could not be more different. Sharp drop-offs, extremely dingy water, and rapidly rising and falling water levels are traits of Shenango River Lake. Impounded in the mid-1960s, the rising waters of Shenango River Lake covered the spot I caught my first Smallmouth Bass from the Shenango River. There has been a population of Smallmouth Bass in Shenango River Lake since the creation of the lake. Like Pymatuning Reservoir, it was uncommon to catch a big Smallmouth Bass until roughly 10 years ago. Something changed at Shenango River Lake just as it did at Pymatuning Reservoir, resulting in a growth spurt for Smallmouth Bass. Now, anglers can catch 4-pound and larger Smallmouth Bass. Fishing acquaintance Randy Hedderick has caught several 6-pound Smallmouth Bass in the past 5 years, and he landed one that was 24 inches long weighing 7.2 pounds in 2019.

I sincerely hope that Smallmouth Bass fishing excites you as much as it excites me. Here's to some of the best Smallmouth Bass waters in northwest Pennsylvania. ☐