



YOUGHIOGHENY RIVER— A Smallmouth Bass Wader's Delight

by Darl Black

photos by the author

The Youghiogheny River was the one remaining Pennsylvania Smallmouth Bass water on my bucket list until last summer when Smallmouth Bass aficionado Pete Cartwright invited us to come for a day on the river. Marilyn and I grabbed our rods and headed south.

As we fished our way across a knee-deep flat towards a slight channel depression, Cartwright provided commentary on the "Yough." "As a youngster, I fished the tributaries to this river

for trout. But, when I caught my first Smallmouth Bass at the mouth of one of those tributaries, I immediately forgot about trout," said Cartwright.

For 34 years, Cartwright chased Smallmouth Bass year-round on the Youghiogheny River, eventually establishing Smallies on The Yough Guide Service, licensed by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's Charter Boat Fishing Guide program.

The shallowness of this north-flowing river during the summer is not suitable for prop-driven outboards. Even jet boaters find it difficult to navigate the Youghiogheny River due to many skinny-water riffles that extend shore to shore with no defined channel. This river is suitable for canoes and kayaks; however, only the most experienced paddlers should attempt



Pete Cartwright with a Smallmouth Bass caught on the Youghiogheny River.

the river section south of Connellsville in the whitewater stretch below Ohiopyle.

"In my opinion, fishing from a kayak or canoe on a river means you miss a lot of good bass-holding water. Wade fishing the Youghiogheny River is more advantageous. Anglers can precisely hit the obvious spots they expect to find feeding and resting Smallmouth Bass. Also, wading reveals minor bottom changes impossible to see when seated in a paddlecraft. For example, a slight wash-out pocket or trough only inches deeper than the surrounding bottom can be a bonanza during the summer," said Cartwright.

According to Cartwright, what really excites visiting anglers on the Youghiogheny River are the number of Smallmouth

Bass you can catch during a summer day. "This is not a place for trophy-size Smallmouth Bass, but there are lots of 12- to 14-inch Smallmouth Bass throughout the river, plus decent numbers in the 15- to 18-inch range. I occasionally get a 20-incher or two during colder water," said Cartwright.

With water low and clear during summer, finesse soft plastic baits are Cartwright's go-to lures. Weightless 4-inch stick worms rigged wacky style, 2.5-inch tube jigs, and 3.8-inch soft paddle tail swimbaits occupy the top spots.

A wacky rig drifts along with the current, until an angler-applied rod tip twitch gives the worm an enticing wiggle; Smallmouth Bass find this tantalizing presentation irresistible. If confronted with a stained river resulting from rain runoff,

Cartwright ties on a 1/8-ounce brown green/ copper flake skirted jig with matching craw trailer—an alluring color for Youghiogheny River Smallmouth Bass. Regardless of the lure, Cartwright covers the water meticulously, leaving no suspect shadow, seam, saddle, or large stone untouched by his bait.

Given that the new Pennsylvania State-Record Walleye was taken from the Youghiogheny River less than 3 months after our visit, I followed up with Cartwright for his insight about Walleyes in the river.

“Our incidental catches of Walleyes throughout the year have grown in the last 5 to 8 years. Although I am not a biologist, two noticeable changes in the river are likely responsible for more Walleyes and larger Walleyes—considerable improvement in water quality and increased number of baitfish. Both of these changes should impact Smallmouth Bass in a positive way. Maybe, we will be seeing more 18- to 20-inch Smallmouth Bass in the future.” ☐

For more information

Learn about the Youghiogheny River Water Trail by visiting fishandboat.com. Click on Boat, then Water Trails.

The Great Allegheny Passage follows the Yough from Ohiopyle to McKeesport. Anglers willing to hike or bike can gain wading access to the river at select sites along the trail.



Marilyn Black with a Youghiogheny River Smallmouth Bass.



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