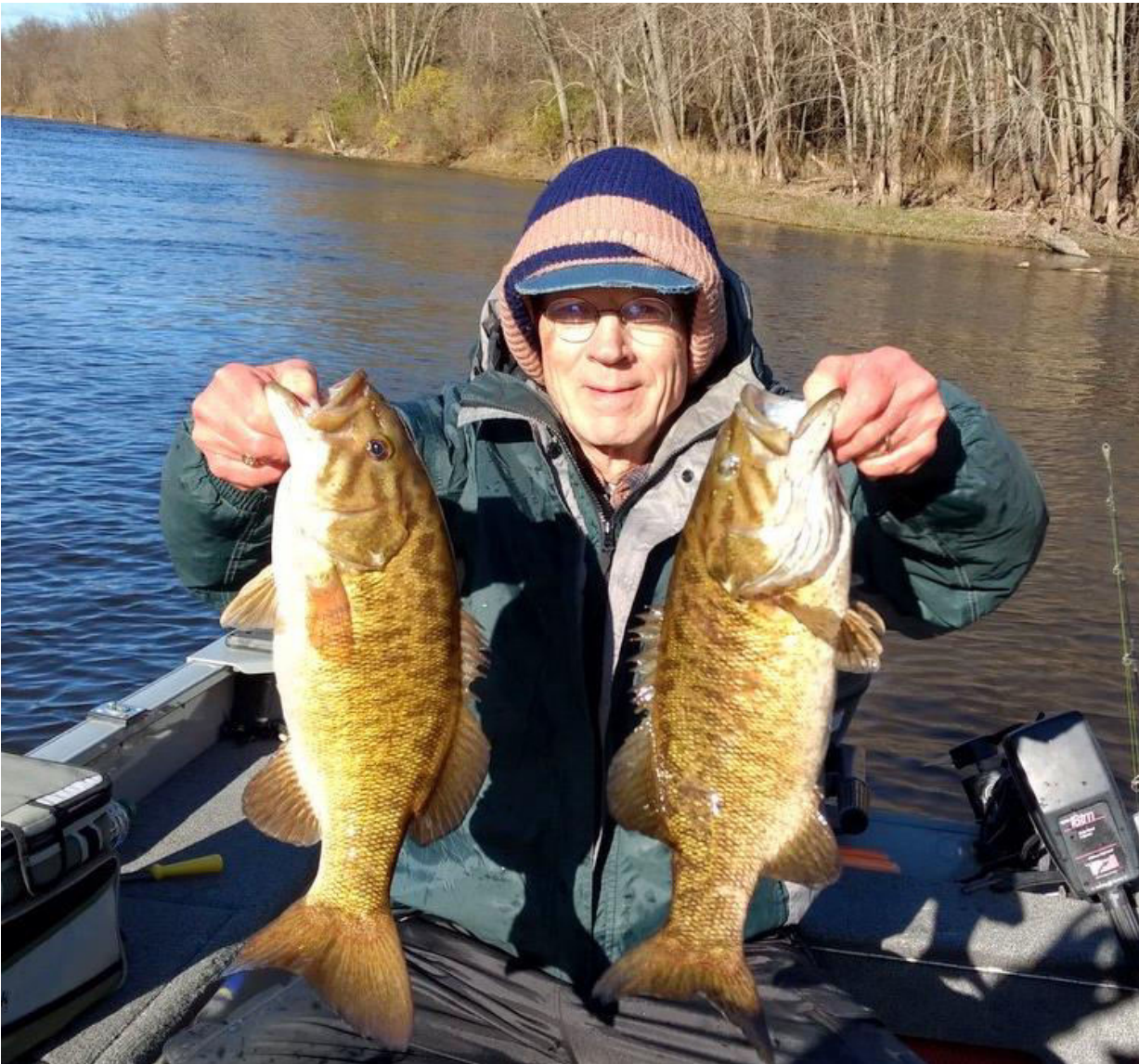


SPOONPLUGGING MID-SIZED RIVERS



2 nice Grand River Smallmouth bass

WHY FISH RIVERS?

Mid-sized rivers are usually under-fished and not crowded. Limited depth means easier fishing. Because of migratory fish, there are more species available and seasons are longer. Current and better water color add stability during cold fronts. Rivers are more fishable in high winds due to less open water for waves to develop. In a heavy fog, you always know where you are on a river and can easily get back to the ramp. And finally, there are usually more hard-bottom areas to walk lures on in a river than in a lake.

USING SPOONPLUGS IN THE RIVER

For much of my Spoonplugging experience I was reluctant to troll Spoonplugs in the Grand River, a mid-sized river near my home in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The river in this area can have holes up to 8-10 feet deep with an average depth of 3-4 feet. Summer low water periods can be a challenge, however, and one must be

cautious in their navigation at that time. Mostly, I was fearful of snagging and had not learned to use the current to my advantage. I ended up fishing it primarily in the late fall where I would cast jump lures and troll slow floating crankbaits, reasoning that the cold water temperatures required slower speeds. The results produced some nice catches of good sized fish. Later, however, I realized that, with Spoonplugs, I could use the current to get more accurate depth control in the mapping process; that walking the bottom is a big advantage; and that Spoonplugs are much easier to get off a snag than a floating crankbait.

PRESENTATION OF SPOONPLUGS

Just as in lakes, Spoonplugs are used in rivers as mapping tools to find structure and fish. The depths they run vary according to whether they are presented against the current or with the current. For example, a #500 Spoonplug (2-4 feet) will run 2 feet deep upstream and 4 feet deep downstream in conjunction with a fairly normal current around 2mph. 2 different speeds are automatically checked with these 2 passes also. The ratio seems to hold true with the #400, #250, and #200 Spoonplugs as well. Those 4 sizes are all that are needed to fish a mid-sized river that rarely is deeper than 12 feet. Both downstream and upstream passes with each size Spoonplug gives very precise depth control, and line length adjustments add even greater accuracy. Fish can be caught trolling both upstream or downstream, the main difference being speed control. Below 6 feet in depth and against a slightly faster current, one must be careful not to interpret current violence as walking the bottom. If one is not sure, a cross-current zig-zag trolling pattern works best. Do not forget to draw a map of the structure with pencil and paper. According to Buck Perry, that is critical.

STRUCTURE IN RIVERS

Mid-sized rivers have many structural elements that need to be checked. Islands, humps, bends, breaklines, current breaklines, eddys, water color breaklines, feeder stream cuts, breaks (rocks, wood, etc), bars, deep holes, manmade structures (bridges, wingdams, walls, etc.), and bottom transition areas all need to be looked at. The deepest water in the area (holes) should be considered the home of the fish, with structural elements as possible pathways for the fish to use on their movements and migrations.

EQUIPMENT USED IN RIVERS

Besides the standard Spoonplugging equipment and lures used in lake fishing, there are certain items that can be helpful on the river. A 3-fluted river anchor around 12-18 pounds works well, along with a 5/8 or 3/4 inch diameter anchor rope. I will anchor and cast quite often, and the larger rope is easier on the hands. I prefer using a flasher depth sounder over a graph because I get instant readings, and a "picture" is not necessary in shallower depths. A lure knocker is essential to have available and some snags are to be expected, although proper technique will minimize lure loss. An oar and extra prop in the boat are safety measures in case problems develop. A Hydrofin plate mounted on the motors' lower unit insures getting up on plane quickly and that a plane can be maintained at a slower speed. It also reduces prop damage.

RIVER BOATS

Most Spoonplugging boats work well in the river. A shallow draft is important, especially on rivers with minimal depths. My boat is a 14 foot aluminum Ultracraft (14CT). It has a 72 inch beam, which is wide and stable. It is powered by a tiller Yamaha 25 horse 2-stroke, giving it plenty of power and speed. A larger or heavier motor on my boat would increase the water depth needed to run it in, and limit my river fishing ability

in this area of the Grand River. Something to look for in a boat is to have ribs or keels on the bottom for better tracking. There are 3 keels on the bottom of the 14CT, allowing me to turn a circle in place. For minimal depths, I often will troll with the motor partially tilted up to decrease the chance of damaging the propeller. In low water, it is important to be familiar with the area being fished and to go upstream from the launch, watching the river surface closely for possible rocks or wood obstacles. I will also refrain from getting up on plane unless there is at least 3-4 feet in depth and I am familiar with the river channel.

SNAGS

At one time, snags were my greatest concern when fishing the river. Now, if I lose a lure, it is more often a jump bait than a Spoonplug. Even if I lost a couple of smaller Spoonplugs in a days' fishing (which I haven't done in years), the cost would be about the same had I purchased and fished with live bait that day. Freeing a snagged Spoonplug is simple. Don't pull too hard and set the hook deep into a wood snag. Go straight back and get directly over the snag and "pop" the lure vigorously, giving slack each time to allow the lure to fall off. If it doesn't, continue going up or downstream and pull hard from the opposite direction and the lure will usually come off. Occasionally I need to get the lure knocker out. If the current is fairly strong, the anchor can be used to hold the boat right over the snag. Having a fishing partner in the boat greatly simplifies boat control here.

RIVER FISH LOCATION

Once a structure in the river is trolled and a map drawn, it is easy to select the best areas to check further by casting both Spoonplugs and jump lures. Anchoring upriver from the area being cast is best, as casting upriver is more susceptible to snagging. More active fish may be found at the head (upstream side) of islands, humps, breaks, holes, and slots. Less active fish may be at the tail end (downstream side) of these structures. The least active fish are often found in the deepest holes or under the cover of logs or the bank.

Fishing mid-sized rivers is a bit of a challenge due to the current, but it can be easier fishing, more rewarding, and less crowded than most lakes. All these concepts are available to see in Buck Perrys' Spoonplugging material. This information is simply the "Back to Basics" approach that Mr. Perry talked about.