

Low Water Advantage



The rivers are running high right now, but by mid-to-late summer falling water levels can concentrate the fish and create some of the best river smallmouth bass fishing opportunities of the year...

by Brian M. Wiprud

Summer brought Massachusetts low water in 2010. I'm accustomed to fishing the Millers River comfortably in June at gauge heights anywhere from 3.0 to 2.0. The USGS site tracked the Erving Millers River gauge height in August lolling at around 1.5 feet. The trout? Long gone. The smallmouth? The river just looked listless.

Think again.

Anybody who is familiar with the Millers will attest that it is one of the most difficult rivers one would ever hope to wade. At any time of the year, shallow water abuts deep holes, and smooth boulders mixed with jagged cobbles create the most confounded tripping hazards. I once made the mistake of bringing the wrong wading boots, ones without felt or

cleats, and I think I invented a number of new dance moves. The complicated subaqueous topography and miles of pocket water add up to ample fish habitat spread out over large areas. When the trout are around, you are as likely to find them in the runs and deep pools as the pocket water. Same with the bass. They're all over the place.

Now factor in the mechanics of low water. A lot of what was once viable pocket water and pot hole habitat is no longer fishy. The river margins become stony shoals and beaches. The result?

For most of the trout, this means high water temperatures, low oxygen, and probable death. They have no choice but to move into cooler tributaries or station themselves over spring upwell-

ings. Even if you could find any remaining trout near the springs, it is widely seen as unorthodox to target them when under the stress of summer's low water conditions. To catch a trout under those circumstances is to kill one. If you're going to catch a trout for food, this is the time to do it, though the Millers' history of PCB contamination carries warnings to limit fish consumption to a maximum of two meals a month.

But who really wants to catch a stressed-out, exhausted trout? Smallmouth continue to thrive in these conditions, and are fair game. The low water pushes them out of the thinning pocket water and concentrates them. A larger pool located in a long run of thin August pocket water collects bass from hundreds of yards of river in either direction. And once there they are more or less trapped in that pool until the water rises. Not only does this condition increase the number of fish that will see your fly or lure, but it also creates competition between the bass. I think this is a much overlooked motivator for fish to strike. When they are close together they are less likely to

scrutinize your offering for fear the fish next to them will make a meal of it first.

In comparison to higher gauge heights, the Millers is a delight to wade under these conditions, and an angler can cross back and forth pretty much at will. Wet wading also becomes an attractive alternative to donning the rubber suit, but I recommend using the wading boots, with felt and cleats if you have them in a single sole. What I really like about wet wading is that even if you fall in, so what? No waders to top. Splash around all you like, it's hot out.

I'll grant you: the smallies aren't huge. But we all know they are excellent game for their size. The best spots will be those with moving water at the head of a pool, where you *might* find a 14-inch fish, but more probably a 12-incher. The size of the fish will decrease with the desirability of the lie, which typically becomes less where the pool tails out. But fish the whole pool very carefully because there will likely be a lot of fish and you want to pick them off one at a time, working your way from the bottom of the pool to the top.





Photo © Brian M. Wiprud

Don't expect monsters, but plenty of action, beautiful scenery (Cardinal Flowers below), and wading in water on a hot summer day all add up to pure enjoyment.

My girlfriend and I fished the Wendell Depot area a couple times during this low water period last year, and some days were better than others. On the best day in mid-August we landed 65 fish between us, up to 13 inches, but more commonly

around 9 inches. We had a blast, and both missed a shot at fish in the 15-inch class. By "missed" I mean we drew them out of hiding but didn't hook them. Joanne's was in the pool just above the depot bridge, mine under a log to the side, just up-



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stream of the bridge. Those are hefty smallies for the Millers. I wish we'd nailed at least one.

Tackle? Not brain surgery. I fly fish and so use a five weight rod, though a three weight would work, too. I have yet to run into a smallmouth that didn't like a #8 woolly buggler. I tie mine with some rubber legs, in brown or olive, some with variegated marabou tails, but I honestly don't think that matters too much. And I have no doubt traditional Clousers would take their share of fish.

To my mind, the fly retrieve is more important than the exact fly pattern or size. Some days the smallies like an active strip; other days they prefer to grab the gently falling fly, stripped close to the bottom. So it is important not only to work the pools carefully, but to do it with a variety of stripping tempos to find the one the fish seem to like best that day. We tried surface flies like grasshoppers and crickets, but I think the ultra-clear

water made the bass skittish to take readily on the surface. There are a ton of one-inch smallies in the river at that time, so going smaller with the flies, or nymphing, just isn't an option unless you cotton to racking up a hundred fish the size of your pinkie.

As for spin fishermen, I have no doubt a small Mepps would slay the bass, though I used to fish the Deerfield using top-water Heddon Torpedos with explosive results.

As August wanes, azure September skies and long shadows portend the approach of fall, and what invariably seems an interminable winter. Yet the Millers and many streams like it in Massachusetts are festooned with cherry red cardinal flowers, purple chicory, and goldenrod. Take the time to enjoy the fading summer glory and some of the best smallmouth fishing our state's rivers have to offer.

Brian M. Wiprud, whose outdoor writing has appeared on our pages in the past, is an angler and crime novelist. His eighth book, Ringer, comes out this July from Minotaur Books.

