

# A Tribute To Virginia's Tributary Smallmouths

*Mainstem rivers are not the only places where you can find satisfying summer smallmouth fishing in Virginia.*

*by Bruce Ingram*

When I was 5 or so years old, I used to sneak off to a small stream named Gish Branch, which is part of the Roanoke River Watershed, and about 100 yards from my parents' house. Then and now, Gish is too small and shallow to fish, as it is just a tiny rivulet of a creek that flows through the Salem area. However, Gish had something that drew me like the proverbial moth to a flame — schools of minnows.

With a discarded window screen, I would spend hours herding minnows into the shallows where I would scoop them up into the screen, which had become, in effect, a seine. Then I would deposit my catch into a tin can where I would identify, perhaps misidentify would be a better word, the fish. Some of the minnows would be labeled trout (the ones with brightly hued sides), while others would be called bass (the very biggest ones) or sunfish (the smallest ones), while in reality they were all just various species of dace, minnows and chubs.

By the time I was 9, I was adventuresome enough to ride my bike (fishing rod balanced on the handle bars) a mile to Masons Creek, where I would spend hours angling for sunfish. My parents were very against my fishing, my dad proclaiming that I was either going to be bitten by a snake or contract poison ivy, and my mom scolding that I would never find a job where I could fish for a living.

Indeed, she sometimes even denounced fishing as the sport of "s and ne'er-do-wells and "devil's. Occasionally, when I would

arrive home delightfully muddy and dirty and reeking of the supreme smell of sunfish, my parents would punish me by taking my bike away for a period of time. Of course, their attitudes and punishments just made me want to fish even more, as it was quite apparently a forbidden pastime.

I didn't catch my first Mason Creek's smallmouth bass until several years later. It was the summer when an older and wiser boy tutored me on the proper use of in-line spinners, additionally chastising me that the garden variety worms that I had loyally been using for redbreast sunfish were "kids' baits" and beneath the dignity of any male over 12.

When I landed my first spinner-induced smallmouth, which was unbelievably huge at 9 inches, I discovered the game fish that still maintains a powerful hold on my angling soul. For that brown bass displayed more power than any redbreast sunfish ever had, and when it leaped from the water as I was reaching to land it, I felt my heart leap as well.

Now I am 56 years of age and still cherish the time spent wading Virginia's small streams. Indeed, events of the past few years have made these mini waterways even more important places. Sportsmen/conservationists have learned that healthy tributaries and watersheds mean healthy rivers — and that, sadly, the reverse is also true. This point has especially been hammered home this decade as major fish kills have taken place on the Potomac, Shenandoah and James

rivers and on major rivers that flow into them, such as the South and North Forks of the Shenandoah and the Cowpasture — just to name a few.

In the spring of 2007, the epicenter of the James River fish kill took place in my home county of Botetourt and so distressed me that I did not fish the James again that year. My fear was that one of the survivors would swallow a hook and die, making a bad situation even worse with my having contributed to it.

A second reason why fishing these tributaries is appealing is that the action can be outstanding. In fact, the second biggest smallmouth I have ever caught was a 22-inch brute that came from a tributary of the James that is only a hop, skip and a jump across. That fish, which I tenderly released, hit a weightless ringworm that had been tossed to the base of a boulder. In addition, on many occasions, I have caught quality-sized, small-stream smallies in the 2- to 3-pound range.

And a third reason why visiting these small streams is a joy is that wade-fishing in the summer can be a highly pleasurable experience, as well as offering an angling adventure. Tim Wimer, who teaches English at Lord Botetourt High School, accompanied me on an excursion last July to a tributary of the James. Afterward, I asked him what he enjoyed most about the

*Tim Holschlag with a good-sized smallmouth that he caught last summer while fishing a tributary of the James. Photo by Bruce Ingram.*

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deaths, even though they may swim away seemingly unharmed.

When fly-fishing, I similarly do not downsize, employing an 8-weight, 9-foot rod. That rod performs well when casting larger flies, such as the aforesaid Big Blockhead and other hefty poppers and surface offerings.

### PROTECTING SMALL STREAMS

If you own land along Virginia's small streams or fish them, then consider placing these waterways (or asking landowners to consider doing so) under a conservation easement. Conservation easements are legal documents that can be constructed to permanently protect a landowner's property from development. Tremendous tax benefits can result.

For example, in 2006, I purchased a 120-acre tract in Craig County and immediately placed the property under an easement. The land features the headwater spring and the beginning section of Sinking Creek, a tributary of the New River. In my own small way, I have contributed to the future of smallmouth fishing on the New River. Additionally, my taxes on

the property have been reduced by 20 percent because of the easement, and I received significant tax returns from both the federal and state governments. Lower taxes, tax refunds, protecting the future of smallmouth fishing, what's not to like about conservation easements.

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation is the state agency for conservation easements, and I have also worked with local agencies, such as the Western Virginia Land Trust and the New River Land Trust. Consult the Web sites below for more information.

I began my angling career as a wade-fisherman on small streams, and the attraction still exists a half century later. This year, treat yourself by beginning — or continuing — your own small-stream fishing career.

### INFORMATION SOURCES

Coolibar: [www.coolibar.com](http://www.coolibar.com), (800) 926-6509.

Tim Holschlag: (616) 781-3912, [www.SmallmouthAngler.com](http://www.SmallmouthAngler.com). I strongly recommend Holschlag's *Smallmouth Fly Fishing*, a very well-written and informative book.

MapTech: [www.maptech.com](http://www.maptech.com),

(800) 627-7236.

New River Land Trust: [newriverlandtrust.org](http://newriverlandtrust.org).

Virginia Outdoors Foundation: [www.virginiaoutdoorsfoundation.org](http://www.virginiaoutdoorsfoundation.org).

Western Virginia Land Trust: [www.westernvirginialandtrust.org](http://www.westernvirginialandtrust.org).

Bruce Ingram is the author of the following books (cost in parentheses): *The James River Guide* (\$17.25), *The New River Guide* (\$17.25), *Shenandoah/Rappahannock Rivers Guide* (\$18.25), and his new book, *Fly and Spin Fishing for River Smallmouths* (\$19.25). To purchase one, contact Ingram at P.O. Box 429, Fincastle, VA 24090. □

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