

[John Brown's Bass - Part 2 by David Weaver](#)

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Some years prior to this bloody drama, likely in the summer of 1853, railroad workers on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad gathered some smallmouth bass from somewhere in the fish's native range in the Ohio River basin. According to some accounts, these fish were placed in water buckets near Pittsburgh, taken eastward by train, and eventually released in the upper Potomac near Cumberland, several dozen miles upriver from Harper's Ferry.



Today such introduction of non-native species, frowned on as it is, wouldn't be considered beneficial and the new invaders would likely be targeted for eradication, much as the "snakehead" fish are targeted today in the lower, tidal reaches of the river where they have been illegally introduced in recent years. In the Nineteenth Century, however, a different ethic prevailed and in the case of smallmouth bass the long term results have been positive. Like the striped bass, the range of the smallmouth followed the expansion of the railroads and we fly rodders are better off for it. Although relatively slow growers (an eighteen inch river smallie is typically eight to twelve years old in this part of the country) the newly introduced bass spread rapidly through the Potomac River system, finding the habitat much to their liking.

The State of Maryland actually owns the entire width of the Potomac River but in the Harper's Ferry area, license reciprocity is in effect and you can use a Maryland license along the Virginia and West Virginia shores. While drift boat fishing is popular in this area and some excellent local guides can show you a great day, I like wade fishing with a fly rod. The habitat around Harper's Ferry is ideal for the foot bound angler, although finding parking areas can be difficult in the immediate area around town. The National Park Service has a shuttle into Harper's Ferry for a few dollars, well worth it to see the old town. Another National Park, C&O Canal, borders much of the Maryland shore and a foot path follows the river allowing for good access to hikers and bicyclists. Be careful on the steep bank along the canal, especially if you're sensitive to poison ivy. The summer months are best for the wading angler due to consistent lower flows although there are a lot of folks tubing and rafting the river below the town when the weather is hot. Most of the "rubber hatch" is off the river in the prime fishing hours of morning and evening and, in any case, the river is big enough that there's room for everybody during mid-day. Fall is great too with beautiful scenery and cooler temps put the bass on the feed and they're very aggressive.

Boulder and ledge rock dominates the Potomac and Shenandoah River channels where they cut through the narrow mountain passes creating an enticing diversity of riffles, pools, pocket water, and runs. I wouldn't consider wading here without felt soles and a wading staff. The smallies are everywhere. During the summer season the wading fly fisherman can effectively target smallmouths

virtually anywhere in the river with boulders or rocky cover being prime locations. Larger bass frequently hold in the cushion of water in front of larger boulders. A popper or deer hair surface fly will often get hammered in front of boulders or ledge rock running perpendicular to the current. Gear needn't be complicated: in addition to the felt soles and wading staff, a chest pack or vest and 7WT fly rod with floating line does the trick. In the cooler months you'll need chest waders. I like to keep a camera in a zip-loc bag.



Potomac River bass usually aren't selective and run-of-the-mill flies should cover the bases. Poppers in yellow and white are dependable and I like dark colored nymphs roughly an inch long with rubber legs for dead drifting under a large strike indicator. Crayfish patterns work well dead drifted too. Clouser Minnows and Woolly Buggers in various colors should round out your fly box.

While there have been reports in recent years of bass in the Potomac showing "intersex" abnormalities, likely from sewage effluent, I have never personally seen a sickly fish in the this river, an observation I can't make for other rivers in the mid-Atlantic region. The bass are healthy and usually fat off the abundant forage which includes schools of shiners as well as crayfish, madtoms, juvenile catfish, and sunnies. The riffle areas have some very large hellgrammites. During evenings in summer there is also a white fly hatch that can bring up good numbers of fish too.

While a fly fishermen has a shot at trophy sized fish, most Potomac smallies average under a foot in length. The 2005 year class was particularly strong and these bass now comprise a large segment of the population. Recent years have seen very good spawning, especially in 2007, ensuring good bass fishing for the next decade. I consider a fifteen inch fly caught river smallmouth a trophy but bigger fish are there and savvy local bait fishermen take bass over 20 inches and four pounds around Harper's Ferry every year. My hope is that Maryland will, sometime in the future, extend the catch and release regulations that currently exist upriver, further downstream to Harper's Ferry to protect these large, very old spawners.

In recent years, another fish from the smallmouth's original range has taken up residence in the Potomac around Harper's Ferry: the muskellunge. While rarely targeted by fly fishermen, muskies are common in deeper pools and near feeder creeks and will take a streamer, especially during the colder months of the year. Although Maryland has stocked tiger muskies, how the pure strain fish got in the Potomac is something of a mystery but they are spawning and the river has become a first class musky river. Channel cats, walleyes, rock bass, and redbreast sunfish round out the fly fishermen's quarry and can save those rare days when the bass aren't cooperative.



With John Brown captured, many Southerners felt that the old crusader would meet a swift and ignominious hanging. Yet, with time, many Northerners came to see the man as the living embodiment of the struggle against slavery and his impending execution a martyrdom. Ralph Waldo Emerson described him in Christ like terms. Frederick Douglas compared his own anti-slavery activities to Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry as being a mere "candle" compared to the "burning sun." Brown's dignity and unapologetic commitment to his cause was unwavering during his captivity and when he was led to the gallows in nearby Charles Town on December 2nd he held his head high with pride, steadfast in his belief that he'd done God's work. Church bells rang across the North that day – an ominous toll to Southerners that their differences with the rest of the country were irreconcilable.

Hours before his death, Brown issued his now legendary, and ultimately prescient, prediction that "the sins of this guilty land can never be purged but with blood." A year later, Abraham Lincoln was elected. John Brown's raid had been another step toward war, maybe the most important one in steeling the resolve of Americans to dispense with compromise and regard their neighbor as irredeemable. Had John Brown been a fisherman, he might have gone to Harper's Ferry for a different pursuit.

Prominent Southerners attended the execution and when the deed was done the pro-slavery crowd broke up and folks headed home, unable to know the impending catastrophe the country would soon be embroiled in. They rode off in carriages and trains and as they passed the river, rumbling over the bridge in a cloud of dust, down in the river below, in the cushion of water in front of a giant boulder, was a smallmouth bass. All muscle, fin, and scale, the predator carefully scrutinized the surface and water column to his front, watching... and ready.