

Smallmouth Basics - Islands

by Norm Minas aka Creekyknees

For the beginning angler , I would like to discuss an easily recognizable feature in rivers- Islands.

To make it easier we will divide the islands into two types. The first are those that are large enough to support trees and the second being the smaller grass covered islands. The small rock islands/humps will be covered at another time.

The grass islands will be covered first as they are the less complex and easier to fish of the two types. These small islands on my river range in size from a couple of steps across to big enough to take a few minutes to wade around. There are usually several of these small islands in relatively close proximity to one another when they appear. On my river they are usually found upstream from the larger islands .

I usually cover these grass islands with a two lure approach. I will start with a singlespin spinnerbait and cast along the front end of the island and both sides to check for the more aggressive feeding fish. The first retrieve will be a faster one in which the spinnerbait brought back just under the surface creating a bulge at the top of the water column. The second retrieve is slow rolling one that occasionally tics bottom. After that I will switch to weighted keeper hook with whatever type of plastic you have confidence in rigged weedless. If you prefer tube jigs, they work fine too. I cover the front and sides again with a slow retrieve worked on the bottom. I then check the washout hole behind with as many casts as it takes to cover that area. On the larger islands of this type be sure to cover all the current breaks created by thier irregular shape. If there are a series of islands together do not leave until you have checked the channels around all the islands. You will want to give special attention to the spots where two or more channels come together. I prefer to cover these channels by casting downstream and retrieveing upstream slowly against the current with a crankbait. I then will use a weighted keeper hook with a soft plastic quarter cast with the current for the less aggressive fish.

The larger tree covered islands are much more complex in makeup. They usually run the full gamut from hard , rocky shores to sand and soft muck bottoms. They have irregular shapes which brings a multitude of current cuts and slack water pockets along thier shores. The various forms of cover include downed trees, boulders and weed beds. These islands will also have lift areas{riffles} , runs{flatter stretches} and holes on the main channel side and in many cases on the side channel. If there are several large islands near each other than you can add in the added attraction of two or more channels coming together.

I use a multi faceted approach to fishing these larger islands. I will start with a minnow bait like a Rapala or at times a topwater{whatever you like is fine} , follow that up with an aggressive bait like a crankbait, spinnerbait or straight shafted spinner{Mepps} as the cover or current conditions dictate and end up with a slow ,bottom bouncing retrieve with a weighted keeper hook and whatever type of plastic I'm in the mood for. Fishing these types of islands with this approach is usually not a quick affair, it can be an all day trip just to cover the area properly.

Fishing cover like downed trees and weedbeds usually calls for a more snag resistant presentation like the spinnerbait and the jig rigged weedless. You can also twitch the minnowbaits and topwaters next to this sort of cover. However if you have a heavy wallet or with practice and lots of confidence{or maybe just a tad nuts} you can throw crankbaits right up into the wood cover. I have found that this can bring strikes from the bigger fish. If you know how to read current , you can use a 9 inch Uncle Josh Black Widow eel on a weedless hook and drift into and along this cover for some true pigs.

For the rockier areas, crankbaits and Mepps type spinners get the nod for the more aggressive retrieves. If there are boulders or large rocks be sure to bang your bait up against them. The sudden change in speed and direction can really excite the fish into striking.

I am not particularly fond of sand as it is a rather sterile environment. However it is worth a quick check if there is enough depth as game fish will sometimes corner a school of minnows in the corners and edges of a sandbar. The softer muck bottoms on the other hand are a much more fertile environment providing lots of food all up and down the food chain. I like to use a faster more aggressive approach with spinnerbaits, spinners and mid-depth crankbaits that run above the bottom. For most game fish this is more of a feeding station than a holding area hence the more aggressive presentations.

The lift areas are on harder bottoms so I tend to go with crankbaits and jigs. You can quarter cast the cranks and jigs and cast downstream and swing them thru the lift by manipulating your rod tip. The runs are covered with cranks, spinners and jigs rather quickly unless something is found like a rockpile to concentrate the fish. The holes are fished with a more aggressive approach on the lips and drops and slower and less aggressively when into the heart of the hole. This is because the fish toward the shallower part of the hole are more likely to be in a feeding mode and those at the bottom in a resting mode.

Do not neglect the lift area that is formed on the downstream side of an island where the channels start to come back together. This can be a spot where the most aggressive fish in the whole area can be found. If there are a couple of channels coming together from a complex of islands , you may have found the sweetest spot of all.