

Smallmouth Bass on a Float 'n' Fly

by Dan Potts

Pretty much everyone knows that “smallies” primarily feed on crayfish. However, like virtually any predator, they will feed on almost anything that is likely to provide them with needed protein. Utah’s foremost historic ichthyologist, Dr. John F. Sigler once said as my professor in college, “A fish will try to eat almost anything that it thinks will fit into its mouth!” Most of us know that smallies are willing to eat virtually anything that moves (and some things that don’t), including smaller fish...

Years ago, I learned that using a hair jig under a float could be very productive for smallmouths from a well-known southern smallmouth bass angler, Charlie Nuckols. During the 1990’s he was marketing a system involving a minnow-like aspirin-head type jig complete with eyes and over-and-under wings, no body nor tail. Because it was tied with craft hair (see accompanying article/photo), it maintained its (minnow) shape, but looked alive with even the slightest movement while being held at a fixed depth well under a bobber float. His approach required the use of a longer rod to swing the setup out over likely habitat, and to then patiently wait for the fish to pull the float under. Sometimes that wait could be quite a while, but almost always worked! After trying his approach, I was truly amazed at how well it worked, even when side by side with expert bass anglers throwing all of the classic “bass lures”. After years of using his “Float ‘n’ Fly” system, Charlie has landed almost every other kind of fish too. So, this approach should also work well at Strawberry for any species.

Like most anglers I tried to improve Charlie’s approach over the years to work better under more conditions, and also and with shorter fishing rods. I still think his approach of using craft hair for the wing and body provide the best movement under a float. I have moved away from his original clip-on bobber to the use of slip floats instead, to allow for easier (and deeper) adjustment of the depth, and the ability to use a shorter rod for easier and farther casting. His original brighter crappie-style hair jigs continue to work great during cooler periods, but I changed my patterns to a more “match-the-hatch” approach to work better in more conditions. I now use a more natural darker over-wing on top and lighter belly-wing on bottom. I also flattened lead headed jigs with a hammer to create my own less expensive aspirin-head jigs. I can easily apply widely available stick-on eyes to both sides of the head, making the hair jig very realistic. (see photo in accompanying article)

NOTE: I found out years ago that aspirin-head jigs don’t snag in the rocks nearly as much as round ones, and, are also much easier to free if they do.

Fly-casters can easily adopt this approach by using the same basic approach without the lead head jig and a much smaller fly fishing float. Even a floating fly line would suffice to indicate bites, although the distance down to a mostly static fly might not be as adjustable as with a slip float and bobber stop. Also, adjusting the knot at the eye so that the fly hangs more naturally (horizontally = perpendicular to the line) should work better. A significant advantage to this approach is that fishers in tubes, kick boats and kayaks should be able to move the rig very slowly backwards not only to help keep a straighter line for better hookups, but also to help move around to encounter different fish.

This is not a rig intended for attracting fish through movement, although natural wave action (wind or boat generated) seems to make the fly/jig move up and down in a very seductive way – hence its effectiveness. The biggest challenge is patience, especially with fly anglers who always want to be casting. So, this might be a great approach for a downwind food break, second pole, or for children. Hooking smallmouth with this approach is easier because as they come up from below and then return back down after they take the lure, the resistance of the float above makes it more difficult to spit the hook back out, especially if it is sharp and barbless.