

How do I fish for smallmouth



Picture from Rapidan float-and-wade trip

Rivers that I fish frequently:

- Potomac, nontidal (wade)
- Rappahannock, nontidal (wade)
- Rapidan (mostly float-and-wade)
- Shenandoah, North Fork (wade)

Other rivers I fished

- Shenandoah, S. Fork (float-and-wade upstream Luray, VA)
- James, nontidal (wade, VA)
- North Fork of the Holston (Saltsville VA, wade)
- Maury (Glasgow VA, float-and-wade)
- Delaware (Callicoon NY, wade)
- Little Tennessee (NC, wade)
- Deep River (Ontario, boat)

Bucket list

- James (float-and-wade)
- New River (float, float-and-wade?)
- Northern Minnesota

Selecting the river

I select my destination the day/night before. I look for:

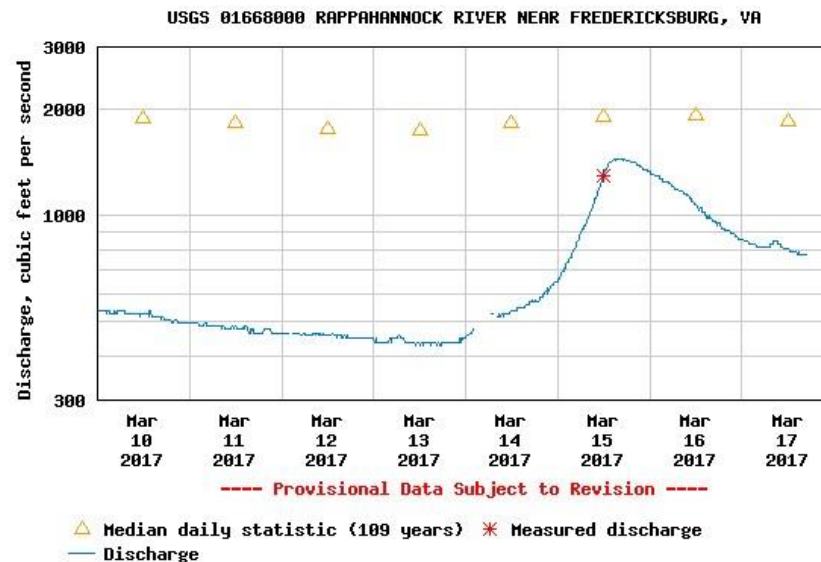
- Current flow and expected water levels (water levels upstream, USGS)
- Water temperature: current, recent changes and trend (primarily early Spring and Late Fall, USGS)
- Rain forecast
- Expected/actual minimum temperature overnight
- Cloud cover forecast
- Wind forecast
- I recheck in the morning before leaving**

For river flows search for **USGS streamflow conditions VA** to find the list of measuring stations by river. Click on the desired one and you will get the available data. Below, Rapp. data for flow.

[Summary of all available data for this site](#)
[Instantaneous-data availability statement](#)

Discharge, cubic feet per second

Most recent instantaneous value: 774 03-17-2017 17:00 EDT



Add up to 2 more sites and replot for "Discharge, cubic feet per second"

[Add site numbers](#) [Note](#)

Enter up to 2 site numbers separated by a comma. A site number consists of 8 to 15 digits

GO

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Daily discharge, cubic feet per second -- statistics for Mar 17
based on 109 years of record [more](#)

Min (1931)	Most Recent Instantaneous Value Mar 17	25th percen- tile	Median	Mean	75th percen- tile	Max (2007)
328	774	1220	1860	2590	3100	15600

Basic equipment

Wading staffs I use: bamboo cane or hockey stick, with rubber cup.

Tackle I use

- Rod:** 690-4, almost any #6 will do
- Reel:** any will do, only needed to store the line unless you use a thin tippet.
- Line:** WF6-F; I prefer redfish type lines (a touch heavier, short head, shooting style); better distance and easier casting, but noisier when landing.
- Leader:** 9' - 11', homemade, surgeon loop and double uni knots, following approximately Lefty's 50% rule.
 - 9' = 4.5 ft of 30# ---- 2.5 ft of 20# ---- 2.0 ft of 12#
 - 11' = 7.0 ft of 30# ---- 3.0 ft of 20# ---- 2.0 ft of 12#
- Why/when a longer leader?**
- Why 12#-test tippet? Pros and cons**
- Stripping finger, snap**

Fly I use more frequently, surface

Gurgler in #4 or #2 hook, black flat waxed nylon, black yarn, black, brown or orange foam, black legs.



Flies I use more often, undersurface

#4 -2 minnow, pearl cactus chenille body; white tail; and tan, gray, green or light olive wing).



Flies I use more often, medium depth

Light or medium weight Clouser, same colors and materials.
I also use the preceding minnows weighting the shank with wire.



Flies I use deep (rarely)
wooly buggers, crayfish patterns, sculpin patterns



Other deep flies: the 6th Man Crawfish



Other deep flies: Bursel crawfish



Other deep flies: the Golden retriever



My fishing buddies also successfully use:

- small poppers
- the “stealth bomber”
- the Dahlberg diver
- nymph patterns

There are hundreds of other SMB flies in the web

Feeding: time of day

In my experience, smallmouth (and especially larger fish) feed actively:

- Early morning: From dawn, as long as there is **shade** on the water (may start earlier, but I've never fished in the dark ... yet)
- Afternoon: From the time the area becomes **shady** until just before dark.
- When **clouds are thick** regardless of time of day, but fishing would still peak at sunrise and sunset.
- When the osprey is not around
- Are they light averse? Ultraviolet light averse?

Feeding locations

In my experience, smallies are primarily ambush predators that prefer to feed at locations that are:

- **shady**
- **in the current** if there are ambush spots (e.g. ledge, large rock)
- **very close to the current** so they snatch passing prey (side pool, outer edge of eddy, seams)
- Shallow areas **close to deep water** where minnows congregate like shallow rock gardens or the edge of weed beds.
- If the water is cold or temperature dropped during the night, I look for slow or still water warmed up by the sun during the morning or afternoon.

Areas I like to fish

- Places with a good bedroom close to a good dining room
- In normal current (not too fast), the downstream side of ledges, in the faster currents over such ledges
- In the current, immediately downstream a not too fast fall if there is protection from the current
- Eddies on both sides of a fall or riffle, even in very shallow water.
- Downstream a fall in fast current if there are large rocks or similar structures to protect the fish from the current.
- The slower sides of very fast currents

(cont.)

- The pool upstream a fall where water accelerates (funnels) and there is protection from the current; the faster the water, the larger the protection needs to be.
- In the main current of the river (no falls or rapids) if there are hiding places (e.g., ledges, rocks, edges of the main channel). Some of these places become a fall when the river is low.
- If sunny, in shady places close to the bank
- A basketball or larger size rock in or at the edge of any type of current, including in shallow water.
- Always read the water from the distance looking for promising places. Select the casting spot before approaching.**

Bedroom and dining room (Rappahannock)



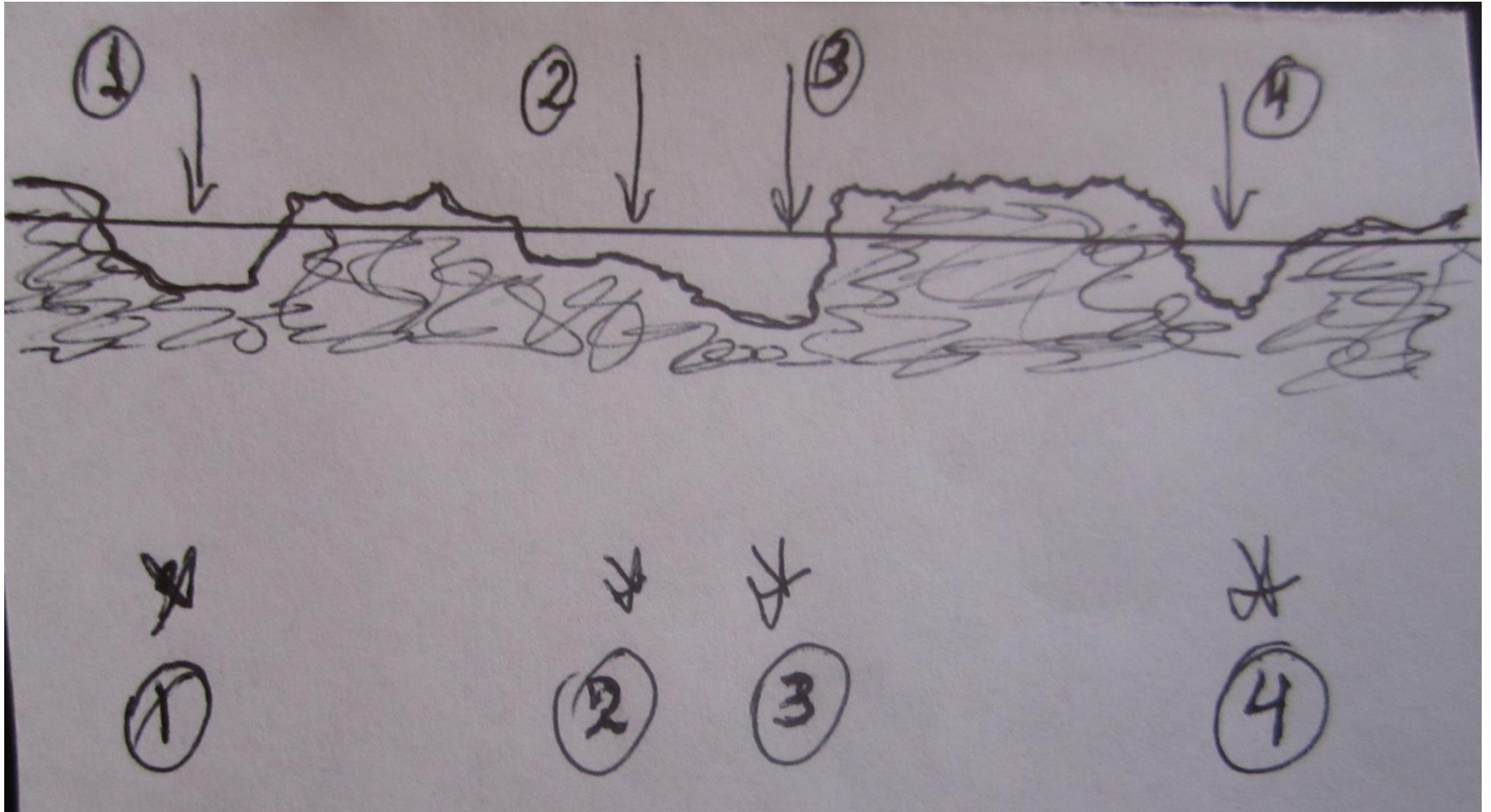
Ledges (Potomac)



Pools, falls, rapids, eddies and ledges (Rappahannock)

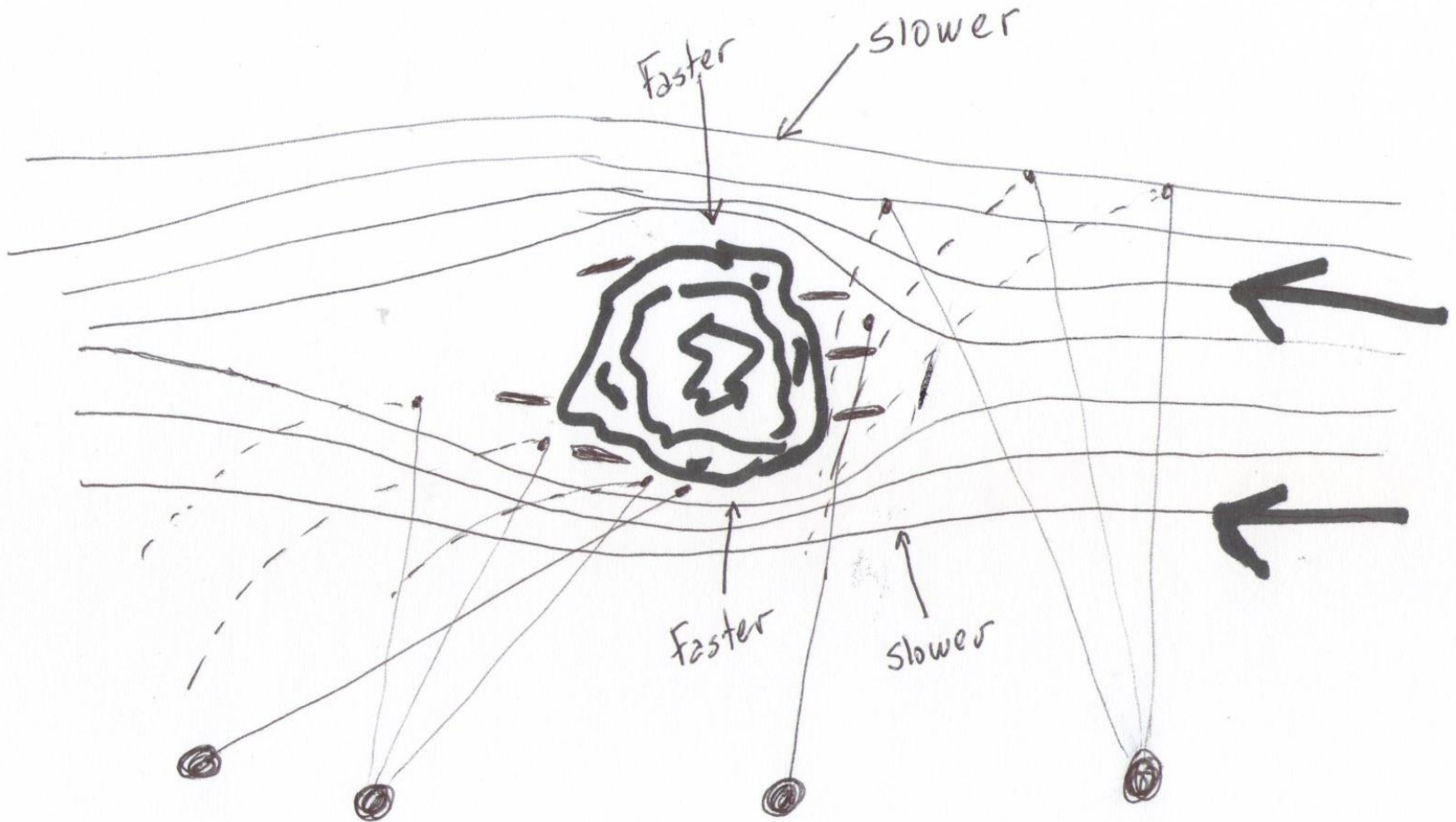


How do I fish a ledge (*but read Harry Murray*)

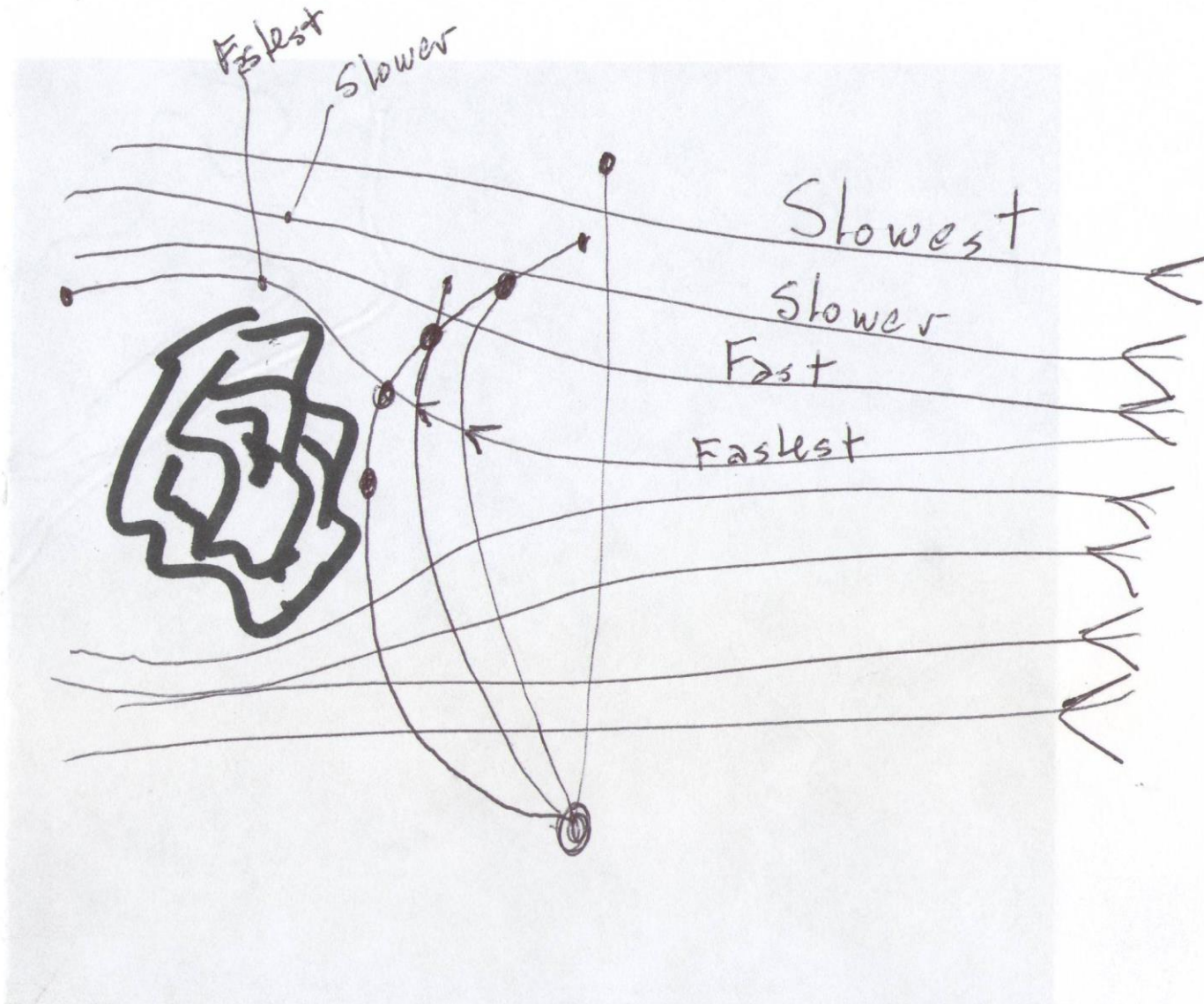


How do I fish a rock in the current (1)

Gurgler vs. streamer



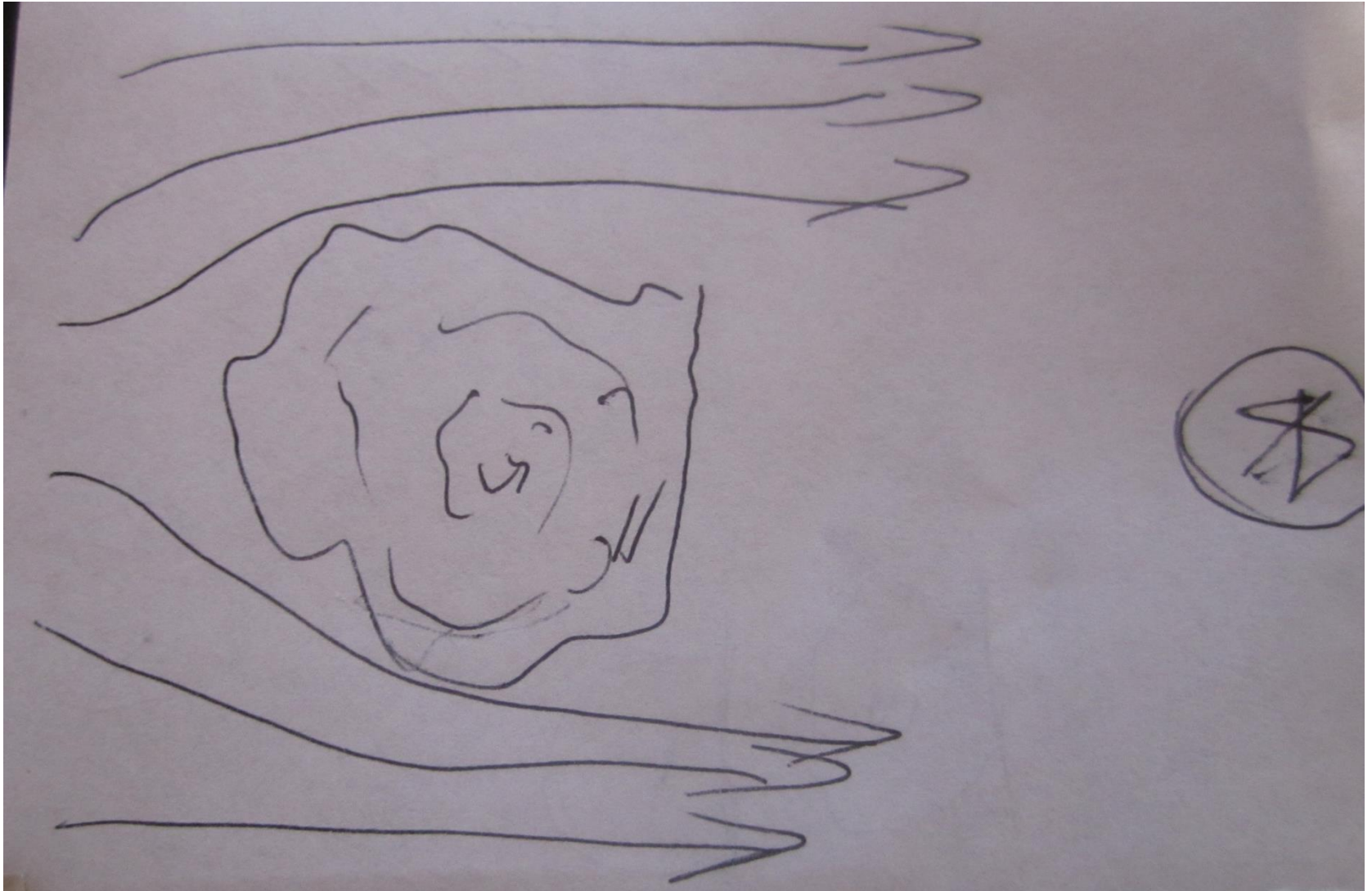
How do I fish a rock in the current (2)



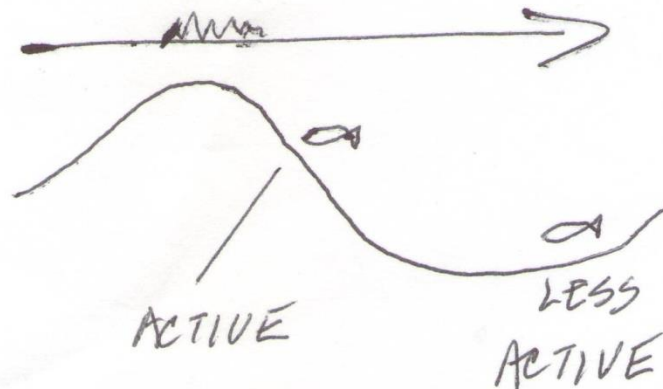
Fishing a rock in the current (1), results



How do I fish a rock in the current (2)



How do I fish a submerged rock in the current (3)



How do I fish a gurgler

Still or slow water

- Upstream
- From the current, perpendicular to the shady shoreline
- Cast, grab the line as the fly hits the water and be ready to set.
- Always keep the tip of the rod close or into the water and the line tight
- Once the fly “lands”, wait until wake disappears, then twitch. Wait until wake disappears and repeat.
- Alternative: touch water and immediate short strip, then same as above.
- If neither works, increase the length of the pull to create a louder noise/larger water displacement
- Strip-set the hook**

How do I fish a gurgler (cont.)

Faster water

- Up and across
- Straight across and down and across
- Touch water, strip ... strip strip ... strip ... strip strip
- Always keep the line

Fast water downstream falls and fast rapids


- From where I feel comfortable to cast
- Up and across
- Across
- Always keep the line tight

Time-frequency of stripping increases with current speed in order to keep desired distance between stripping spots

How do I fish a subsurface minnow

- Straight upstream (ledges) if current is slow. It becomes more difficult as current speed increases.
- Up and across (diagonally to the current). It also becomes more difficult as current speed increases.
- Across and down and across
- Rarely straight downstream
- While the fly is drifting, I make short strips (6") to change the speed and direction of the fly

How do I fish a Clouser

About the same. Sometimes, when fishing slow water, I give it time to sink before stripping initially and in between strips so as to achieve a  swimming pattern.

How do I set the hook: STRIP SET

Floating line:

- When the line is tight (no current)**
- When there is a belly in your line (current)**

Sinking line

How do I try to catch the fish

- As the fly lands, keep the line in my hand, tight and ready to set the hook
- Keep the line always tight and **strip set!!!**
- Once a large fish is on, try a second hook setting move using the rod butt.
- Keep the line tight!!!
- Let the fish swim without trying to overpower it, but keep it as close to the surface as possible. Why? Because smallies love to dive under the rocks.
- Stories: Rappahannock, downstream Motts Landing; Rappahannock, upstream Kelly's Ford (under rock and running a rock garden at the bend).
- Have the rod at an angle no greater than 45 degrees. Do the "down and dirty". Don't try to overpower the fish, just to tire it.

- Too little and too much tiring.
- Try to tire the fish away from me. If “green”, the fish may come towards me and go under/around my legs and tangle with the floating line.
- Bring it in by stripping slowly. Bring the rod “down” while stripping to keep the line tight; then bring the rod back to 45 degrees for another sequence
- Do not put the leader inside the guides, keep the line-leader connection out of my tip top
- Remove the hook in the water or holding the fish from underneath or from the jaw
- Revive by placing head to the current for a few seconds and then releasing. With a highly stressed fish be sure it will swim before releasing
- The warmer it is, the more important a fast release becomes.

How do I select new fishing areas

- Prefeasibility:** identify a promising area using web maps and looking for access. The look for more specific fishing spots keeping in mind that the further away from the access point is always better. If possible, visually inspect it by walking the coast, and design an ex-ante fishing plan.
- Feasibility:** fish a few times in good conditions covering the larger area in order to select specific spots based on results, but always return to previously discarded, good looking spots.
- Detailed design:** wade the river when it is too low to fish in order to draw a detailed mental map of the favorite areas and to discover new ones; example: the Potomac last November.

Honey holes

- Shady, deeper, close to the current and distant from access are often better
- Better fished upstream, if possible/comfortable
- Read the water, select the casting spot and approach it making the least possible noise **on** or **in** the water!
Includes **wake**
- Fish the spot/area with patience, but do not cast repeatedly to the same spot. Try a few casts around before trying again. The fish may be there, but only take the fly if I place it in front of him

Materials I found and find useful (alphabetically):

Books

- Holschlag, Tim (2006) *Smallmouth Fly Fishing: The Best Techniques, Flies and Destinations*, Smallmouth Angler Press.
- Kreh, Lefty (1999) *Presenting the Fly: A Practical Guide to the Most Important Element of Fly Fishing*, Second Edition 2006, Lyons Press.
- Murray, Harry (1996) *Fly Fishing for Smallmouth Bass*, Lyons Press.

Other sources:

Murray monthly newsletters: <http://eepurl.com/K3eeb>

Murray Articles: <http://www.murraysflyshop.com/fly-fishing-articles/>

Fellow fishers

The End