

# TOP TEN

## Smallmouth Bass Flies

### *How to Tie & Fish Them*



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# Introduction

## The Right Fly

How many times have you stood streamside with an overcrowded drying patch full of “loser” fly patterns?

Do you have a strategy for fly selection or do you just keep opening up the fly box, extracting flies, tying them on, and praying?

I think we have all had our fair share of moments when we concluded “they just weren’t biting”. Then you talk to another angler who fished the same day elsewhere and did well with a different approach altogether. It’s tough to handle at times.

In truth, the fish will generally hit something under most circumstances if the fly and presentation are blended correctly.

**This guide is for anyone who wants to catch more fish.** If you use these proven smallmouth flies and change flies based on our strategic system, you will catch more fish consistently than you ever thought possible.

The flies written about below have been tested and voted upon by guides, experts and everyday anglers, just like you, who profess their efficacy. These flies all work under different conditions and circumstances. It’s up to you to experiment in a systematic way to find the best fly at the specific time.

**Please pay special attention to the next several paragraphs.** It is here we summarize our fly selection strategy we highly recommend you try! This knowledge combined with our time proven fly selection, will put you into more fish this season.

**Ok, Let’s Get Started!**

## Fly Selection by Category

### *Change Categories, Not Fly Color!*

**This is very important - so please take the next couple paragraphs very seriously.** Many anglers will simply switch the colors of a fly when trying to “get in the game”. They are sold on a particular pattern. Too often the fish simply are not keying on that category of fly pattern and changing colors does little good.

Maybe the guy down the way is doing OK with them. If you’re being out-fished with the same fly - the other angler is generally fishing the fly better than you are. **We’re going to tell you what to try, in what order, and how to fish them effectively!**

**We separate our flies by category.** For example, a **popper** is a surface pattern designed to cause water disturbance and attract fish. These are a world apart from a **nymph** pattern for which very little action is imparted by the fisherman and skill is required to properly dead drift this type of offering correctly. **Streamers** are subsurface flies that can be actively worked or allowed to dead drift, depending on the situation. These flies are all in different categories.

Once you learn to switch to an alternative category of fly, rather than a color change, you'll increase your catch rate dramatically! Once you force yourself to step away from using only the flies with which you've previously scored - will you really ascend the ladder of fishing success.

## Water Selection by Category

We know the fish are there - whether we readily admit it or not. If I run the gamut of fly categories through a deep run for example - and strike out, I will then move locations. I will not repeat my failures on yet another deep run. Instead I will try a different water type: be it a riffle, a pool (working the head, main body, and tail out), etc. Don't repeat your mistakes - in other words. When you do score, remember exactly the water type and then begin repeating that pattern as closely as possible.

I hope you understand the logic behind this system of changing flies and water by category. If you make an attempt to employ it, you will be pleasantly surprised by what you discover about fly fishing for smallmouth bass and all other species as well.



## Typical Strategy

**#1 Surface - Popper:** I nearly always start my bass fishing with a popper. Why? They are relatively weedless, fun to cast, cover a lot of water, easy to use, and fish love them. Poppers are also quite forgiving. You can make a lousy cast and still catch fish. However, on my home waters, the bass are far less enthusiastic about poppers and prefer subsurface.



### #2 Surface - Deer Hair Popper | #3 Deer Hair

**Diver:** I'll fish over good water with a popper for no more than about ten minutes. If I don't get a solid take, I'll switch to a surface/subsurface category which contains divers. I'll run those through *the same water*. If I get a refusal - but movement on a popper, *I will go to a diver*. Many times the more subtle

submersible action of a diver will trigger strikes that will not come with a high floating popper.



**#4 Subsurface - Clouser:** When I switch to subsurface, I typically go to a Clouser first. In my area, I know chartreuse and white is perennially effective; so I'll go there next and work a Clouser at different angles to the current to see if the fish have a preference to the current presentation, as they often do.



**#5 Subsurface - Wholly Bugger:** If the Clouser fails, instead of trying a different color, I'll switch categories to a weighted streamer. I may go to a brown or olive Wholly Bugger, or a variant such as the Tequilly (left inset). Experiment with **active stripping and periodic dead drifting of the fly**. The Wholly Bugger and its allies (Beadheads, Sparkle Minnows, and a hundred others...) look like so many different fishy creations;

they must be tested to be fair to your fish. Again I'm running all these through the same water or general area.

## #6 Subsurface - Feathered Streamer - Deceiver:

Next try a traditional feathered streamer, such as a **Deceiver**. This is another fly that catches fish anywhere. Color variations based off the traditional white underwing are always good to tie. You can chuck, duck and strip these at various speeds.



## #7a Subsurface - Fur Streamers - Strip Leech: These are the “hush - hush” Go-To flies for guides. You can’t fish them wrong! I will always try a fur streamer rather than



this position.

a different Deceiver pattern and will often use these before a Deceiver. The fur streamer, such as a big White or Black Bunny, can be stripped or dead drifted and are very effective at many times throughout the season. Often times you want something bulky. The rabbit fur undulates in water unlike anything else and will often turn a humdrum day in to an unforgettable one. Don’t forget to tease these at the end of your drift buy jigging your rod tip on a straight line- you will be rewarded if you do! Fish nearly always hook themselves in

## #7b Subsurface - Fur Streamer - Fly of the Day

Here’s a hot one for you! Why not combine all that’s good - in one fly? One of Lefty Kreh’s favorite bass flies is the Red & White Hackle Fly (Homer Rhodes tarpon fly). Lefty feels the red and white combination is always a great fish catching color combination. Here’s a fly that works better than the hackle fly: **The Fly of the Day** (Dave Kollmann - St. Cloud, MN). Who says mink is out of style? This one goes a step beyond a “one color” fur streamer by adding a deadly red butt section and some silver



tinsel. Most are pre-wrapped with lead and sink well. The FOD’s can be run off floating line, but a sink tip (terminal ten foot section of fly line sinks) is even better. Dead drift first, then work them a bit (if dead drifting doesn’t produce). This fly is one of the best patterns for smallmouth bass because it’s based on several proven fish catching precepts. You and your smallmouth - be the judge! *This one is not shown in the tying section.*

**#8 Subsurface - Synthetic Streamers:** Talk about a can of worms! The new synthetics have really arrived and the fish love them! Everyone has their own favorite and new ones are hitting the scene everyday. After experimenting with a bunch of them - if I had to pick one to put you into some fish, the **Murdich Minnow** wins. This is another carpet bagging saltwater fly that delivers as well or better - in warm water. These are generally unweighted and ride high in the water column, great for shallow or clear water.



**#9 Subsurface - Crayfish:** A lot of [FlyBass.com](http://FlyBass.com) visitors feel crayfish imitations are nearly as good as poppers. The reason I wait on these is because of the way they should be fished. See more about how to fish crayfish patterns in their section below, but suffice to say I slow down and use a strike indicator. This is often a “last resort” type play, since I don’t care for strike indicators or bobbers. Nonetheless, they are extremely effective and can bail you out of a tough day. I’m showing two crayfish patterns: Clouser and the Hi Tail Craw.





**#10 Subsurface - Nymphs:** Harry Murray wrote about nymph fishing for smallmouth bass over two decades ago. It's one of his favorite approaches. Since the hellgrammite is one of the largest, most delectable food items in the river - you'd

better try one! Pictured is a Hellgrammite Nymph pattern, developed by Murray, using an ostrich feather for the tail. Murray likes the way the ostrich moves in the water. Most importantly the fish voted and ostrich won. Fish them dead-drift and/or straight upstream back to you. **This takes practice to perfect.** You can make life simple and quarter up stream; throw a couple upstream mends, swinging the nymph deep through the run. **Strike indicators are life-savers here!** Get in the habit of using one - or color the end of your fly line a visible color, such as orange or chartreuse - to help detect subtle takes.

### Follow the Yellow Brick Road...

Follow this general pathway of fly selection by category and water type, and your fishing will improve dramatically. If you hit on a pattern that is mildly effective, this is the time to try different colors! If not, follow my guide of fly category selection until you score. Write me at [info@flybass.com](mailto:info@flybass.com) and tell me how this works for you! The flies are fail safe, proven winners. Continue to develop and improve your overall game by practicing fly casting and fly manipulation, especially nymphing techniques.

You now have the strategy, let's look at the tools!



Brad Miller and Bruce Miller with the Dean of Smallmouth Bass Fly Fishing:

Lefty "Bernard" Kreh (photo: March 2008)





# Top Ten Smallmouth Flies

## How to Tie and Fish Them

By Brad Miller | FlyBass.com

Of all the challenges related to fly fishing, choosing the right fly is number one for most anglers. I believe fly casting is the single most critical aspect to elevating one's fly catching potential. But our [FlyBass.com](http://FlyBass.com) polls have shown selecting the right fly, as the number one challenge.

We have both experimented and researched popular flies for catching various species of fish. This Ebook focuses on the most effective flies to attract and catch smallmouth bass (*micropterus dolomieu*), throughout the season, in all waters - especially moving water.



We classify our fly selection by category, as follows:

1. Poppers (2)
2. Divers (1)
3. Clousers (1)
4. Streamers (4)
5. Crayfish Patterns (2)
6. Nymphs (1)

These categories of flies are also listed in the order of popularity as voted on by visitors to [FlyBass.com](http://FlyBass.com). I know there are others, but these constitute the primary selections with which to experiment as you search for the hot fly of the day. There is cross-over between categories, e.g. a Wholly Bugger can be dead drifted as a nymph or stripped as a streamer, but generally the categories are distinct.

### Category Fly Selection

Category fly selection technique for “on the water” experimentation is often ignored by anglers as they feverishly pluck flies from their box, willy-nilly, without strategic consideration. It is also very effective in helping you quickly find a winning pattern rather than simply changing colors of the same fly. Changing the category of a fly was written about by Lee Wulff (the famous salmon fisherman) in the ‘40s and 50’s. He felt it much more productive to change the category of a fly rather trying different flies within a category - when searching for effective patterns. Please read about this technique of changing flies in the introduction, if you missed it.

FlyBass Poll		
Most Effective Smallmouth Pattern? Pick One!		
Popper	28.87%	177 of 613
Feather-type Streamer	9.79%	60 of 613
Fur Strip-type Streamer	9.95%	61 of 613
Clouser Deep Minnow	20.39%	125 of 613
Crayfish Pattern	25.77%	158 of 613
Nymph	5.22%	32 of 613

## Gear

A quick look at what we feel are the best all around rod, reel and line set up for fly fishing bass. We normally suggest a **#8 weight rod**. This depends a bit on your favorite water - seven weights are OK as well. In Minnesota, we often can encounter three to five pound bass and prefer to land them very quickly to avoid injury to the fish. Also on bigger water we generally have wind to deal with throughout the season and an #8 will handle most conditions. **Weight forward floating fly line to match the rod weight** will suffice for 75% of your bass fishing.

You may consider “over-lining” one weight class (#9 weight forward floating fly line on a #8 rod), to aid your overall casting ability. Your leaders can vary. **A tapered six to eight foot leader is fine for subsurface** in color or tainted waters. When throwing surface flies or anytime **the water is clear, go to a ten to twelve foot tapered leader with a six to eight pound test tippet** of about 24 - 36 inches. Try the bonus knot described at the very end of this guide for a fast, strong terminal connection. **The reel is not important for most warm water fly fishing.** This is where you can really cut costs. Just get something light with a decent drag on it - you should be able to find an adequate fly reel for under \$50.

Here is our top ten pick for the most effective smallmouth flies to have in your vest:

## Top Ten:

1. Popper: Foam Popper
2. Popper: Deer Hair
3. Diver: Dahlberg Diver
4. Clouser: Deep Minnow
5. Streamer - Wholly Bugger (& variants)
6. Streamer - Feathered: Deceiver
7. Streamer - Fur: White or Black Bunny, Fly or the Day
8. Streamer - Synthetic - Murchie Minnow
9. Crayfish: Clouser
10. Crayfish: Hi Tail Craw
11. Nymphs - Murray's Strymph

Did I say ten? We'll call it a fisherman's ten (eleven). We will start with everyone's favorite bass fly and work deeper from there.

## Poppers

As dry fly fishing is considered the essence of trout fishing, so it is with smallmouth or largemouth bass. There are those who fish poppers exclusively. Such anglers are addicted to what we all love: the visual excitement of seeing the take!

The two of the first three flies in the top ten are actually three different types of poppers. While there are many more shapes and sizes, having a selection of each of the following will put into more and bigger smallmouth

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End of this sample of “Top Ten Smallmouth Flies”

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