
VOLUNTARY SANCTUARY: THE CASE AGAINST BED FISHING FOR RIVERINE SMALLMOUTH

As the Ozark hills turn vibrant green and water temperatures in the Meramec River basin climb toward the 60°F to 65°F range, a primal ritual begins. Native smallmouth bass, move from the deep wintering holes of the Meramec, Bourbeuse, and Big River into the shallow, gravel-laden riffles to spawn. For the fly angler, this clarity and movement represent a tempting target. However, stripping streamers or dropping heavy craw patterns directly onto active spawning beds in these ecologically fragile waters is a practice that threatens the future of one of the finest native smallmouth fisheries in the Midwest.

In the Meramec basin, the success of a year-class rests almost entirely on the shoulders of the male smallmouth. After sweeping out a nest in the chert and dolomite gravel, the male guards the eggs and small fry with a ferocity that borders on self-destruction. During this period, he is not feeding, he is surviving on stored fat reserves while fending off constant raids from longear sunfish and crayfish.

When a fly angler targets a bedding smallmouth bass, the physiological impact is severe. The explosive fight of a smallmouth on a fly rod, while exhilarating, creates a massive buildup of lactic acid in the fish. In water temperatures above 65°F, a smallmouth already weakened by weeks of fasting may lack the energy to recover and return to the nest, leading to total abandonment. In the diverse ecosystems of the Meramec Basin, nest raiders are relentless. It takes only the short time required to unhook a fly and snap a photo for a school of sunfish to decimate thousands of eggs. By the time the guardian is released, the damage to that year's recruitment is often irreversible.

The Meramec, along with its tributaries like the Huzzah, Courtois, and Dry Fork, hold a unique place in Missouri's natural heritage. These are not stocked rivers, they rely on wild, native recruitment. Smallmouth in these waters exhibit high site fidelity, returning to the same gravel bars year after year. When we target the most aggressive, largest males on their beds, we are essentially removing the alpha genetics from the breeding pool. In a spring stream environment, where habitat is limited by low summer flows and seasonal flooding, every successful nest is a victory for the species. Disrupting this process for a few minutes of sport risks creating a genetic bottleneck, where only the less-fit or less-protective fish survive to pass on their traits.

Fly fishing is often defined by its emphasis on fair chase and a deep connection to the environment. Casting a weighted fly to a fish that is physically incapable of leaving its post is a departure from these values. The challenge of fly fishing should lie in the hunt, finding the fish in their summer holds or catching them during the aggressive pre-spawn window when they are moving into the 50°F to 55°F water.

By practicing voluntary sanctuary during the peak spawn, fly anglers can do their part to make sure the largest fish successfully reproduce, growing the high quality size structure we all want to see in the Meramec Basin. Voluntary sanctuary also helps the river avoid "dead years" where high angling pressure and weather events combine to wipe out a generation of fry. These spring fed rivers and creeks are under constant pressure from erosion, siltation and invasive species, practicing voluntary sanctuary allows for a strong, undisturbed spawn.

The Meramec River basin is a crown jewel of Ozark fly fishing, offering a wild experience that is increasingly rare. To keep it that way, we must respect the biological quiet period of the spawn. While it may be tempting to cast at a visible 20 inch smallmouth hovering over a gravel nest, the true mark of a steward is the ability to walk past that fish. By giving them the space they need to complete their cycle in the spring, we are doing our part to protect the long term health of these fragile, native, riverine smallmouth populations.