

# Fishing for Smallmouth Bass in Door County



A beautifully patterned Smallmouth

## **Location:**

Door County is located near the city of Green Bay (WGS84: N44.50630 W88.01491) and is the thumb of Wisconsin. If you follow HWY 43 up from Milwaukee you will come to Green Bay and the gateway to the a very diverse and beautiful area of the state to fish. There are a lot species available to talk about but this article focuses on the wonderful species, the Smallmouth Bass or Smallie as it is often called.

## **Smallmouth Fishing In Door County**

By

Paul B Downing


The crystal clear waters of Green Bay and Lake Michigan lap against Door County's towering limestone bluffs. Enchanting bays are guarded by classic, and still functioning, lighthouses. Cherry pies, cherry wine, cherry pancakes and cherry, well, cherry anything tell of its agricultural heritage. The interior is dotted with cherry trees, apple orchards, and vineyards. First class theater and outstanding golf courses add to the attractions. The Nordic culture still permeates the place, a legacy of early fishermen who came for the abundant yields of its waters. No wonder Door County, Wisconsin is rated as one of the ten most popular summer vacation destinations in the country.

What many visitors do not know is that those waters hide some of the best smallmouth fishing in the country. Bass are found almost anywhere you can wet a line. Door County may be smallmouth bass heaven. All up and down the peninsula, bays, coves, and points hold bass, lots of them. Visitors sit on docks and soak night crawlers with good success. But the really good fishing requires a boat. As you can imagine, some spots are better than others.

I vacationed here with my family when I was young, almost 50 years ago. I have fond memories of great fishing back then. Wondering if it had held up over the years, I set out to renew my acquaintance with this beautiful place. Let's explore four of the best spots I found.

## **Sturgeon Bay**

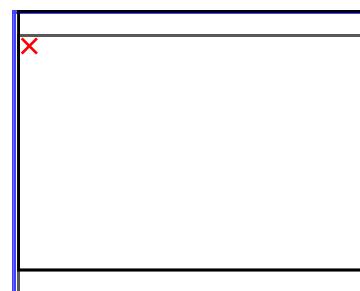
One of the prime locations for these great fighting fish is the Flats in Sturgeon Bay. I spent an afternoon there and I could not be more pleased with the results. Leaving the boat launch at Sawyer Park in town on a beautiful July afternoon, Gary Nault, my guide, and I headed west past the Sturgeon Bay Boat Works where a giant ore hauler was being repaired. As the Bay widened, we headed toward the north shore. Gary told me that the bass were still in the shallows and very active. The Flats is a large area on the north side of Sturgeon Bay, opposite Potawatomi State Park. Less than three miles from the dock we slowed. This, Gary said, was where the fish were biting.

 I could see the bottom clearly. We were in only 5 feet of water. Gary set us up to float over a rock hump that shallows from 6 to 3 feet. The smallmouths were in here feeding on Gobys.

The Goby is saltwater invader that has exploded in the Great Lakes since it was accidentally introduced. Unfortunately, the

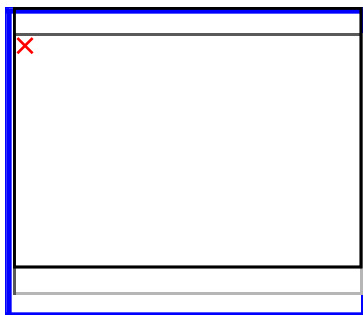
Gobys eat anything, including smallmouth eggs, which has fishery biologists worried about bass recruitment. Fortunately, the bass love to eat them. To imitate these 4 inch minnow like fish, we used plastic grubs on a jig. Cast the lure out on a spinning or bait rod and retrieve it just fast enough to keep it off the bottom. The Goby are bottom feeders so the bass are looking for them near the bottom.

It didn't take long. After a couple of casts both Gary and I were hooked up. Not the trophy smallmouth we were hoping for but a good start. Smallmouth are known as the best fighting fresh water fish for their size and these 12 inch guys were out to prove their mettle. It is amazing how strong these fish are.





We continued to float over this rock pile with good success, hooking fish after fish. Then we went back and floated

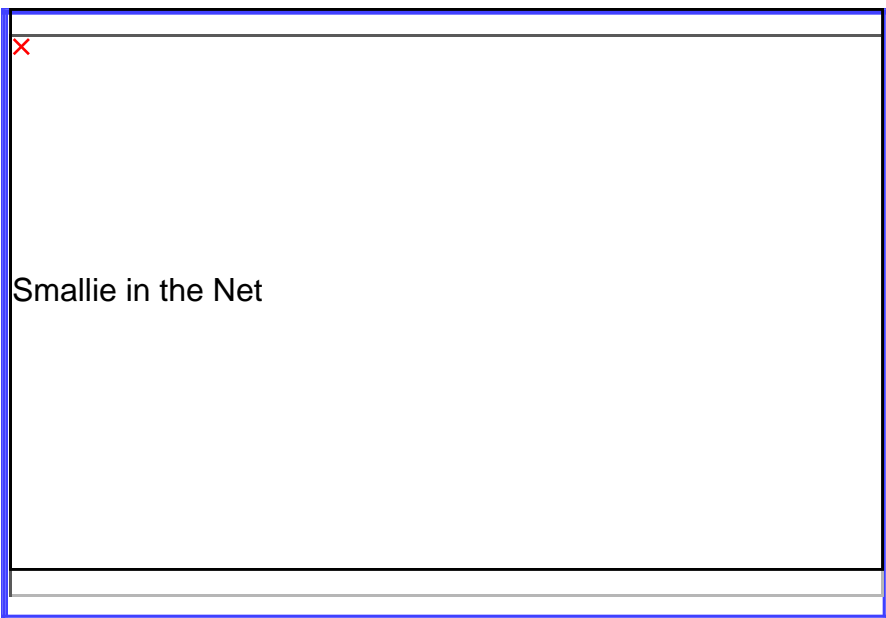


it again with similar success. We took a number for good bass off that pile, a couple over 3 pounds.

We then headed a bit further west to a ledge where the water dropped off from 3 to 6 feet. This is a recurring theme for smallmouth fishing in Door County. Smallmouths are attracted to these ledges and there are lots of these ledges throughout to County's waters. This particular ledge held fewer fish, but they were bigger.

As the sun neared the horizon, we moved into even shallower water, no more than 3 feet deep. The bass had moved in to feed as the light dimed. Then as the sun was about to set, they stopped biting. It was as if someone threw a switch. Gary told me that this switch off is common here. Well, it was time to go anyway as the wind was coming up and dark clouds were moving in, threatening rain.

Smallmouth fishing in Sturgeon Bay is excellent from the start of the season on the first weekend of May until late September. The bass gather on the Flats for pre-spawn. This time of year they are very shallow, often in less than 3 feet of water. They stay after the spawn until the water warms in mid-July. During the summer they move out to humps and rock piles in 8 to 12 feet of water. Gary prefers to use live bait then. He rigs a large slip bobber with a leach or night crawler on the hook. He likes the action of this big bobber in the waves. Keep the bait a foot off the bottom. If you catch a Goby, you are too deep. By September the bass move to deep points 20 to 50 feet down. Then he uses a drop shot with a 2.5 inch plastic leach or a tube bait. Gary's key to success is location, location, location. Fish the edge of drop-offs. If you are just a few feet off, your success will drop off to nothing.

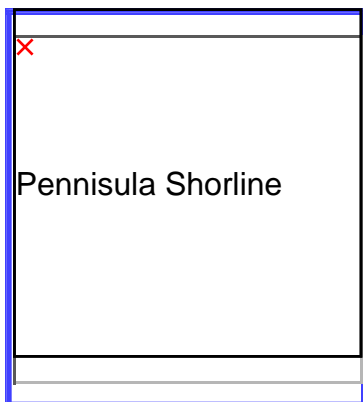


Smallie in the Net

**Access:** You will need a boat. The boat launch is at Sawyer Park in Sturgeon Bay, GPS 44 49 40.37N 87 22 43.97W. The Flats are to the northwest. GPS 44 52 54.73N 87 23 14.75W

**Size:** The Bay is fairly large but the best fishing is on the Flat which is about 3 miles long and about 3 miles west of the boat dock.

### Fish Creek



Penninsula Shorline

The town of Fish Creek is on the Green Bay side of the peninsula about 19 miles north of Sturgeon Bay on Hwy 42.

Returning to a place where fond boyhood memories lurk is often disappointing, so it was with serious trepidation that I approached my day of bass fishing in Fish Creek. One always fears that those fond memories would be dashed by reality. Today was destined to be great? or a disaster.

When I was in high school, my father would bring me up to Fish Creek to fish the opening of the bass season, which back then was in mid-June. We would camp in our car it Peninsula State Park just north of town and fish in the shallows of the Park. We did very well with poppers on a fly rod or spinners on a spinning rod. We kept a couple of bass for dinner which we cooked with bacon in a cast iron skillet over a wood fire. I can smell the smoke and hear the fish sizzling even now. Those trips were one of the great memories of my times with my father so you can understand why I might be a bit apprehensive about my return after a 50 year absence.

Fish Creek is one of the many scenic bays on the Green Bay side of the Door County peninsula. On the north shore of the Bay is Peninsula State Park. At the mouth of the bay, about two miles from the boat launch are four small islands that form somewhat of a barrier for the bay. The Park is one of Door County's treasures. Panoramic views open from the top of the limestone bluffs. Hiking trails take you to the birch and hardwood forests of the wild interior. A classic light house, open to the public, towers over the bay. The Folklore Theater offers such classically Wisconsin productions as Cheese Heads, The Musical. Combined with a scenic golf course and abundant camp grounds, the Park can be a destination in itself.

But I was here for the fishing. I met Paul Woerfel, my fishing companion, at the marina in the heart of town. It was early July so I expected to be fishing in deeper water out at the islands. Paul informed me that the bass were still in shallow water. As we headed out, memories of those trips with my father ran through my head. To my delight Paul headed right to the coast of Peninsula State Park, my old stomping grounds.



We stopped where a ledge dropped from 3 feet down to 6 to 8 feet of water. Paul set me up with spinning rod rigged with drop shot. We would be fishing with night crawlers. A drop shot rig is a weight on the end of the line and a hook about 18 inches above the weight. The hook is that far from the bottom to keep the worm away from the Gobys. Put a worm near the bottom and you will instantly feel the tap, tap, tap of a Goby stealing it.

I cast the worm toward the edge of the ledge. Keeping a tight line as it hit the bottom; I would raise the weight every few seconds and let it fall in a new spot. It didn't take long. My line tightened and I set the hook. I landed a nice smallmouth. As we worked along the ledge, we caught several nice bass, a couple in the 3 pound range. We had not yet found a 5 pounder, a size smallmouth that is fairly common in the bay and considered a trophy throughout the County. After a while, Paul hooked up on a heavy fish. Was this the 5 pounder we were hoping for? After a good fight, we saw the fish. It was a sheepshead. The sheepshead, also known as freshwater drum, have moved into Green Bay from the Fox River system where they are native. For some reason many fishers do not like them. These great fighters range from 5 to 15 pounds. To me they are an added bonus.

The bass stopped biting on this ledge so we headed further out along the Park coast to a point where there was another drop-off. The water here was just a bit deeper, going from 4 feet to 10 feet. We caught several more nice fish including a couple of 3 to 4 pounders.

After a bit, Paul suggested that we try a different spot where he knew that bigger bass often congregated. He warned me that this spot was hit or miss. If the bass were there, we could catch a lot of big fish. If not, it would be a nice ride out to the islands. I was game, so off we went.



We approached the opening between the two Strawberry Islands and anchored in 4 feet of water. Gulls from the islands complained loudly that we were intruding on their territory. We fished through the racket. A strong current runs through the gap between the islands, so I cast upstream and bounced my drop shot back to the boat with great anticipation. But today the big bass were not there. I caught one 3 pounder and that was all. Still, it was worth the try.

From the open of the season in May, the bass are usually in pre-spawn mode. They cruise the shoreline in 5 to 8 feet of water. Look for a shoreline with a less rocky bottom near their spawning areas. The lure of choice during pre-spawn is dark tube bait on a jig. Cast toward shore and retrieve just fast enough to keep the lure off the bottom. It is best not to fish for spawning bass as the minute you take a bass off its bed, the Gobys move in and eat the eggs, reducing recruitment.

After the spawn, the smallmouths move to the shallow drop-offs like those we fished in early July. Later in the summer and into fall, they move out to drop-offs in 12 to 16 feet of water. Use a drop shot and night crawler or a suspending Rapala. Be sure you are on the edge of the ledge as being a few feet off will reduce your chances of success substantially.

As we headed back to the marina, I reflected on my day and compared it with the days I remember from years ago. It compared very favorably. We had caught a good number of smallmouths to 4 pounds, about as well as I had ever done with my father years back. It was a great day.

**Access:** The boat ramp is in the marina in the middle of the town. As Hwy 42 comes down the hill heading west, it turns right, north, at an intersection. Instead of turning, go straight. The boat ramp is two blocks ahead, GPS 45 07 42.30 87 14 41.82W. There is also a boat ramp in the Park. The ledges off Peninsula State Park are at GPS 45 08 47.00N 87 14 34.50W. The gap between the islands is at GPS 45 10 07.79N 87 14 05.99W.

**Size:** The bay is indented a couple of miles and is about a mile wide. There is good fishing all along the shore and out at Strawberry Islands, about 2 miles from the marina.

## Washington Island

Washington Island is at the very northern tip of the Door County peninsula. To get there take Hwy 42 north to the car ferry at Northport. The ferry passes over the waters of Death's Door, so named because of all the ship wrecks that have occurred there over the years. This famously treacherous body of water is what gave Door County its name. On most summer days it is a delightfully scenic half hour trip on fairly calm waters past Pilot Island. The ferry, which easily accommodates a boat trailer or an RV, leaves every 45 minutes in summer. Check the schedule to be sure.



Now, why would you want to go to Washington Island? Many go there for the scenery and the Icelandic culture, but I go there for the bass fishing. Locals will tell you that Washington Island has the best trophy smallmouth fishing in Door County. But then fishers and guides from all over Door County will say the same thing about their local water. I can tell you that Washington Island has perhaps the easiest bass fishing in the County. And it has its share of 5 pound plus smallmouth too.

Excellent smallmouth fishing is just a stone's throw from the marina boat ramp that is next to the ferry dock. Detroit Island is just east of the ferry dock. The ferry enters the harbor between the two islands. Some anglers fish just off the channel where the ferry comes in. But most go inside Detroit Island. The East Channel is a shallow dredged out cut between Detroit Island and Washington Island. That is where Jimmy Doering and I headed.

Jimmy suggested I try a drop shot tipped with a 3 inch PowerBait minnow. As we drifted through the channel, we cast toward the edge of the cut which is only about 3 feet deep. The bass were there. A couple of casts and I hooked into my first Washington Island smallmouth. Not a monster, but a tough fighting youngster. There were lots more to come. Interestingly, there were no fish visible in this shallow water even though the bottom was clearly visible. We would cast to an area, hoping, but not seeing anything. Then out of nowhere a fish would hit. We caught fish after fish. Most were in the 12 inch range but every once in a while a 16 inch plus fish would take our offering. We caught over 30 bass in short order. It was great fun but after a couple of hours Jimmy suggested that we move to another area to try for bigger fish.



Exiting the harbor through the ferry channel, we turned right (west) to fish along the shore line. As with most areas in Door County, there was a drop-off that fell from 3 feet to 8 feet. The smallmouths were cruising along this break. There were fewer bass here but they were visible. You could see them swimming parallel to the drop-off. They sure looked bigger. I love sight fishing but sometimes it is very frustrating. I would cast in front of one of these monster bass only to have them turn up their nose at my offering and swim by. I tried the drop shot with no success then switched to a dark tube jig. I got ignored. Jimmy did manage to entice a couple of 4 pounders but we could not get the really big fish we could see. My trophy Washington Island smallmouth would have to wait for another trip.

Unlike the rest of northern Wisconsin, Washington Island bass fishing does not open until July 1. The local fishermen asked the State to keep the area closed to fishing during the spawn, which is later in the year here because of the area's cooler water. Jimmy tells me that the East Channel produces all summer with the occasional 5 pound plus smallmouth mixed in among the smaller fish. The water is always cool here so the bass seldom go deep. During the summer big bass will be found all along the shoreline of the islands and shoals, always relating to drop-offs. Tube baits and drop shots usually work all summer.

Nice Bass from the Cut

**Access:** The ferry from Northport takes a boat trailer and the marina near the ferry dock has a boat launch. North Port Ferry GPS 45 17 25.40N 86 548 39.90W. It is less than a half mile from the island's dock to the East Channel, GPS 45 19 57.64N 86 54 40.06W. The west shoreline starts at GPS 45 20 16.30N 86

**Size:** The East Channel is approximately a half mile long and 60 feet wide. The west shore goes on all around the island so there is plenty of water to fish.

## The Trophy Smallmouths of Rowley's Bay

A dark shadow moved to my left just at the edge of my casting range. My lure landed five feet in front of that shadow. One crank of the reel and my lure stopped. No smashing strike, just a sudden heavy weight on the line. This was a good fish!

Rowley's Bay is on the east (lake) side of Door County, Wisconsin almost to the top of the peninsula. I had fished this bay many times when I was young, some 50 years ago. Today, as it did back then, the Bay has a reputation for holding trophy smallmouth bass so I was back to reacquaint myself with it. The definition of 'trophy' smallmouth varies throughout the country. Here it is defined as any smallmouth over five pounds, generally a fish over 20 inches long. Rowley's Bay may be the best place in Door County to find your trophy.



Facing to the southeast, Rowley's Bay is a big semi-circle. To the west the Mink River enters the Bay. The Mink is unique. It has tides. The flow into and out of the river is caused, not by the moon, but by winds off the lake that push water up the river causing an up-river flow. When the wind slows, this built up water flows back out into the Bay, thus causing an ebb and flow like an ocean tide. It is one of a very few untouched fresh water estuaries left in the Great Lakes. Preserved by the State and by The Nature Conservancy, it is much like it was when the Potawatomi Indians lived here over 150 years ago. This natural treasure can only be visited by kayak as the mouth of the river is too shallow to let a boat pass. The Mink serves as a spawning ground and a nursery for fish and wildlife. It may well be the reason that there are so many large bass found in the Bay. However, the best bass fishing is in the bay itself so a bass boat is your best choice.

The northern point of the Bay is formed by a shallow reef just under the surface of the water. Off this reef are sharp drop-offs that go from 2 down to 6 or 8 feet deep. The clear water allows you to see bass as they patrol the area looking for food. It took me a bit of study to spot the bass. They appear as dark spots among the stones. However, when that spot moves across the bottom, it is not a shadow, it is a bass. Spotting them became easy with a little practice.



This is sight fishing at its finest. Spot a fish and determine which direction it is moving. Cast a few feet in front of the fish and retrieve the lure with a slow steady pace. If you are lucky, the fish will spot your offering and intercept it. Retrieve your lure just fast enough to keep the lure off the bottom. If you are catching the moss that grows on the rocks, you are reeling too slowly. Some fish are intent on frustrating you. They will follow the lure to the boat but not take it. Others will ignore it completely. Then there are those that jump on it immediately, like the one I talked about at the beginning.

When the line tightened, I knew that I was into a big fish. Was this the trophy I was seeking? It is funny how a fish that you could see working the bottom of the lake disappears when on your line. As I strained to bring it in, I was looking to see just how big it was. I could not get a glimpse of it. Then it accommodated by coming to the surface 20 feet from the boat and shaking its head violently. When I saw that big head, I knew I was into my trophy. I sure didn't want to lose this one. Smallmouths have the well-deserved reputation of being the toughest fighting fresh water fish in the country pound for pound. This monster took that reputation literally. It dove for the bottom, took out the drag, came to the surface and shook its head, then dove under the boat. Finally, a fine 21 inch smallmouth came to net, easily over 5 pounds. I had caught my trophy. A quick photo and it was back in the water with no harm, released to fight again another day.

My fishing partner, guide Bret Alexander, and I had a great day. For the first four hours we caught many bass on these flats. Most were in the 3 to 4 pound range with a good number going over 5 pounds. Then for some reason

known only to the bass, they stopped biting. We searched a drop off on the other side of the point but there were no fish there so we went further into the Bay toward the Mink River. Here the fish were more scattered because there was no drop off to relate to, but we did find some willing participants. Among them was the fish of the day, a 5.75 pound trophy.



Rowley's Bay Resort, the location of the boat ramp, offers lodging and a classic fish boil. White fish, onions, and potatoes are boiled with special spices in a big iron pot. At just the right moment, kerosene is added to the wood fire, causing the pot to boil over the edge. The meal is done. The Resort is also the home of the most decadent cinnamon roll I have ever enjoyed.

**Access:** The Bay is at the end of County Road ZZ north east of Sister Bay. A boat launch is available at Rowley's Bay Resort, GPS 45 13 09.84N 87 02 02.84W. The point is at GPS 45 13 18.05N 87 02 00.70W.

**Size:** The Bay is approximately 1.5 miles wide and 1.5 miles deep and much of it is fishable flats. You will seldom see more than one or two boats on the water. It is big water so a good size boat is recommended.

So there you have a summary of a few of the great places to pursue smallmouth bass in Door County. A wonderful

place to vacation, it is easy to find things for the family to do while you sneak off for a bit of fishing. Or take the family with you. The fishing is not highly technical so even small children can have a ball.

**Weather:** May can be cold and windy with great days mixed in. Summer is pleasant with highs in the 70s or 80s. Afternoon thunder storms are always a possibility. September offers cooler temperatures and some magnificent color as the trees turn. This is big water and wind can come up quickly so be prepared.

**Season:** Bass fishing opens the first weekend in May. From then until June 15, it is catch and release. From June 15 on 5 bass may be kept with a minimum length of 14 inches although few fishers keep any bass. Washington Island's season does not open until July 1.

**Techniques and Equipment:** Medium action spinning gear is effective. Jigs with tube baits and drop shots with night crawlers are the most commonly used baits. Fish just off the bottom to keep away from the Gobys.



**Species At This Location:**

Bass Smallmouth