

"Smallies on the Little T"
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by Jay Kumar

North Carolina's
Little Tennessee River Is an untapped hot spot
for hard-fighting bronzebacks . . .

SOMEONE SAYS "bass fishing in North Carolina" ---what comes to mind? If you're like me, you can practically taste the sweat running down your face as you probe likely looking weedbeds in lakes and tidal rivers, looking for that monster largemouth. Certainly, smallmouth fishing wouldn't even come up.

For the most part, we'd be right. But western North Carolina is mountainous and cool, much like its neighbors, Virginia. West Virginia and Tennessee, all of which are prime small mouth country.

Western North Carolina is no different. And tucked away in the Nantahala National Forest is a place where these fish, the "fightingest" of all, swim free and largely unmolested: the Little Tennessee River.

In fact, almost no one fished for "little T" bronzebacks until a transplanted Arkansas restaurateur decided, after searching all over the South that this was the place he was going to establish an outfit-ting business.

It's an "if you build it they will come" story: in 1991, after getting lost on his way out of the Great Smokey Mountains, Jerry Anselmo found himself paralleling the Little T on Route 28. He stopped in town and asked where he could rent a canoe. The answer? Nowhere. So he borrowed one and "just caught the heck out of smallmouths.". That day he started looking for property on the river and the rest is history.

Although Anselmo has put hundreds of people on the river since 1995, when he opened Great Smokey Mountain Fish Camp and Safaris, the fishing remains as good as it was that first day. And the scenery isn't too shabby either. Sandwiched between the Great Smokies to the north and the Chattahoochee National Forest (in Georgia) to the south, the Little T is in one of the most beautiful areas of the country. It helps that the riverbanks are mostly undeveloped and consist primarily of woods and pastureland. But the smallmouth fishing is what's most important.

If you like to fish streams --picking apart the eddies, pockets and holes that you know must hold bass --then you'll immediately recognize the Little T. It's canoe water, where you alternate between making pinpoint casts as you shoot through current, and beaching your canoe to wade and cast leisurely among the rocks and rapids. It's also mild water, so worries about personal safety are at a minimum. If you have any canoeing experience you should feel comfortable tackling the Little T on your own.

A free-flowing stream, Little T water varies from crystal clear to nearly opaque. As in most smallmouth rivers, however, the fishing is fairly consistent. That may be because smallmouths are aggressive or because river fish are less apt to pass up a meal than one of their more leisurely lake brethren, or both. Nonetheless, when the fish get used to changed conditions, or when you figure out how to catch them, they'll be hungry. Anselmo opens his doors April 1, but the fishing really kicks into gear in late April or early May. As is the case for all waters, early spring presents conundrum: On the one hand, it's a good time for big fish (and a good time to rinse off the winter doldrums); on the other, the water might be high and muddy, and the fish uncooperative. When spring is in full swing, the smallmouth fishing gets more consistent. The first stretch of productive Little T fishing runs until mid-June, when summer kicks in: Perhaps because Little T smallmouths are accustomed to a cool mountain river, when the water heats up too much, the fishing slows down.

The next stretch of good fishing is from late August through October, which is when the leaves change in the Smokies. "It's a gorgeous time of year," Anselmo says. He closes his doors Nov. 1.

Little T smallmouths average a pound or better, which is above average for a stream rarely wider than 30 yards. The larger size of the fish may be because few locals fish for smallmouths.

Or perhaps there's something unique about the river: The Cherokees thought the area was important enough that next to the river they built what's known as the Council Hut Mound for the Center Nation of Cherokee Chiefs, where the chiefs gathered to meet about important matters. Chief Cowee, an important Cherokee figure, also had his village on the river; stone fish traps used by the Cherokees are still visible.

Leaving fish traps aside, good rod-and- reel anglers can expect to catch a number of 2-pound fish. If you fish hard, adds Anselmo, it isn't unusual to catch one over 3 or 4 pounds. "Every once in a while we get one around 5, but that's a rarity," he acknowledges. Anglers average eight to 12 solid smallmouths per 3-mile run, which usually takes four hours to fish thoroughly. "You can't fish this river fast because you'll miss too many good spots," he advises.

Anselmo and his guides recommend light to ultralight spinning tackle with no more than 6-pound line. The lighter outfits "make it that much more fun," he says. The lure of choice is one that's a proven smallmouth- fooler: the Rebel Wee Crawfish (note: this is not the smallest size Rebel makes). Preferred colors are natural shades of brown and green. Other good lures are twister-tail grubs in watermelon, pumpkinseed and the perennial smallmouth favorite, chartreuse. Use a 1/8- ounce jighead and bring plenty because of the rocks. In slower, deeper water, Carolina- rigged 4-inch lizards in brown, green or smoke are good producers. Use a 1/8-ounce weight and a 6-inch leader. Small topwater plugs are good bets in the morning and evening.

A great thing about Anselmo's operation is the number of options available, starting with the river itself. Not only is it home to smallmouths, but rock bass, bluegill, walleye, catfish and even a few largemouths swim in its waters. (The largemouths usually are in the slower, deeper areas and are more difficult to catch.) If you decide you want to try something different, he offers guided trips for trout (brown, brook and rainbow) on the Tuckasegee River, a short car ride away.

Typical stream lures, like this Tiny Torpedo can be counted on to attract strikes from quality bronzebacks in the Little T. Photo: Tom Evans (next column) If after a day or half-day of guiding you'd rather fish on your own, you can put in at Anselmo's main camp on the Little T, and he will pick you up after you take out at one of the three other pieces of property he owns on the river. Or you can camp over- night on one of these properties. The main lodge, which sleeps six, also has camp sites and RV hook-ups. If you still haven't spent all your outdoor energy, you can rent mountain bikes and go for a ride, or Anselmo will steer you to one of the many mountain hiking trails. (Note: Anselmo's operation is one of constant self- improvement, so if you arrive and part of the camp is in the midst of construction, don't panic.) Finally, if you're like me, one of the best parts of a good fishing trip is the food. Anselmo, an acknowledged gourmet food nut, doesn't disappoint. Spoiled by years of owning restaurants in Hot Springs (Ark.), Memphis and New Orleans, he can't eat like the rest of us. And he doesn't have to, thanks to a load of gourmet knowledge he picked up from the chefs he employed. In fact, Anselmo is so into good food that the first things you'll see in the main lodge are rows of mustard and sauce-filled jars. By advance request and for an extra fee (well worth it), Anselmo will fashion a gourmet lunch or dinner that will have you missing his cooking as soon as you're gone. Most likely, when you leave the Little T you'll have memories of fun fishing and a full belly -which is what it's all about.



Smallies **T** on the **LITTLE**

By JAY KUMAR

Western North Carolina's Little Tennessee River offers smallmouth fishing that rivals any stream in Tennessee, Virginia or New England. Photo: Jay Kumar