

Introduction to Smallmouth Bass Float Fishing

Float fishing is bigger than one kind of water or fish

A drift boat is not just transportation. It is a stable fishing platform sometimes referred to as “float fishing” and it simply means fishing from a boat rather than wading or standing on shore. It can happen on moving water, where a drift boat travels with the river’s current, or on flat water such as a lake. It also spans species: warmwater fish such as smallmouth bass and panfish, as well as cold-water trout.

Why learn from a drift boat?

Drift boats originated in the Pacific Northwest in the early 1900s and were designed to move efficiently through shallow, flowing water. Many can float in roughly four to six inches of water. On a typical river float, the boat moves at approximately the speed of the current - often two to five miles per hour - opening access to long sections of productive water without requiring an angler to wade every step. That access is only part of the appeal. A drift boat is especially inviting for first-time anglers, older anglers, photographers, or anyone who is not comfortable wading.

What your first time feels like

Your guide rows, manages the boat, reads the water, and helps pace the day. You will usually fish from a designated position while the boat approaches likely holding water. There is time to practice, rest, take photographs, and ask questions. No one expects a perfect cast. The goal is to make each presentation a little more purposeful than the last. In other words, the drift boat gives you support and range but you set the pace.

Let’s talk smallmouth bass fishing

Smallmouth bass often relate to structure and “cover” - rock shelves, boulders, submerged wood, weed edges, current seams, and changes in depth. They use these features to rest, hide, and ambush prey. From a moving boat, these targets arrive and pass quickly. That makes accuracy and time in productive water more valuable than unnecessary distance.

A controlled 30-foot cast into the right seam is usually better than 50 feet into average water. Compact casts also spend less time in the air, tangle less often, and allow faster follow-up shots. Your guide may ask you to fish forward of the boat so the fly reaches the target before the boat and oars do.



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Key points to understand

Trust the rod

A fly rod stores and releases energy. You already have plenty of power; the trick is allowing the rod to do its share. Slow the casting stroke enough to feel the rod load, then make a smooth change of direction. A rushed, forceful stroke often creates wide loops, slack, and fatigue. A measured stroke creates control and often produces more useful distance with less effort.

Begin low, close to the water when practical; this gives the stroke useful mechanical advantage and keeps the cast compact. Use a smooth acceleration and a clear stop. Let the line straighten before beginning the next stroke. Aim at a specific window—a seam, shade line, rock edge, or pocket—rather than merely casting “over there.” Make fewer false casts. Put the fly back in the water, where fish can find it.

Anticipate rather than react

Drift boat fishing becomes easier when you prepare before the fly reaches prime water. Make an early mend if the current begins to pull the line. Move the rod into position before the fly enters the best part of the drift. Gather loose line before it becomes a knot. When a strike is likely, be ready—but remain calm.

Your guide’s instructions may sound like a short sequence: “rock ahead...cast now...mend...let it swing.” Listen for the timing as much as the target. Over time, you will begin to see the same sequence for yourself.

Manage line inside the boat

Loose line can catch on seats, bags, shoes, and boat fittings. Keep it in a tidy area at your feet, and avoid letting coils pile up. Before casting, glance down and confirm that the line can travel freely. This small habit prevents many missed opportunities—and keeps the boat safer.

Stay connected - and do less on the swing

Whether you are swinging a bass fly through a current seam or presenting a wet fly for trout, maintain just enough tension to sense what the fly is doing. Too much slack hides the take; too much manipulation can pull the fly unnaturally or move it out of the zone.



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On the swing, “doing less” is often exactly right. Allow current, boat position, and the fly’s materials to create motion. Follow the fly with the rod tip and preserve a light, living connection. You are not trying to drag the fly. You are trying to know where it is and be ready when a fish changes its speed or direction.

The take and hook set

For smallmouth, think firm and controlled - not fast and dramatic. When the line tightens or you feel a decisive pull, use a short, confident “strip set” while maintaining contact. Avoid a theatrical overhead strike that can pull the fly away or send it back toward the boat.

Once connected, keep steady pressure and let the rod absorb the fish’s movement. Follow your guide’s direction about clearing loose line, using the reel, and steering the fish away from structure. Smallmouth may surge, jump, or change direction quickly. A bent rod and consistent pressure are more useful than brute force.

Bass and trout: shared skills, different emphasis

The foundation for all types of fly fishing are accurate casting, line control, observation, and calm fish fighting remains the same. Because many fly fishing anglers fish for trout, we should point out key differences in smallmouth versus trout fishing.

CHARACTERISTIC	SMALLMOUTH BASS	TROUT
FLIES	Often noisy, active, and suggestive	Often natural and more imitative
WATER	Generally warmer and slower	Generally cooler and often deeper
HABITAT	Cover and structure for ambush	Clearer feeding lanes, depth, and refuge
PRESENTATION	Can be less precise and more provocative	Often rewards stealth and a controlled drift
HOOK SET	Firm, controlled strip or short set	Controlled lift or set matched to the method



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Safety begins before the first cast

As noted, a drift boat is stable, but it is still a moving platform. Here are some points below that will help ensure a safe experience:

- Do not step on the seats. Use the approved step and handholds your guide identifies.
- Ask before getting in or out. The front angler generally boards first, then moves to the assigned position.
- Stand near the centerline of the boat and keep your legs inside the leaning brace when fishing standing up.
- Remain seated in rough water or whenever your guide asks.
- Wear your life vest. If local rules and conditions allow it to be removed, keep it immediately accessible as your guide directs.

Casting etiquette protects everyone

Two anglers can fish comfortably when each person respects an assigned casting zone. As a starting rule, the front angler fishes from the oars forward and the rear angler fishes from the oars back. The rear angler is responsible for avoiding casts that cross the front angler. Both anglers must remain aware of the rower. Keep casts high and away from the boat, oars, and people. Never cast directly across the rower's working space. If positions, wind, or targets change, pause and ask. A moment of communication is always better than forcing a cast.

Come ready to learn

Dress for the weather, bring sun and eye protection, and tell your guide what would make the day comfortable and useful. The best first float is not measured only by fish landed. It is a day when the boat begins to feel familiar, casts become quieter and more accurate, and you start recognizing where the next fish might live.

Smallmouth bass make wonderful teachers: they reward a fly placed in the right water, a connected presentation, and a calm response to the take. Trust the rod. Keep the cast compact. Anticipate the drift. Stay connected. Set firmly, then let the rod work. Those habits will serve you on warmwater lakes, moving rivers, and cold trout water alike.

