

Bronzeback Age

Smallmouth bass ushered in a new angling era



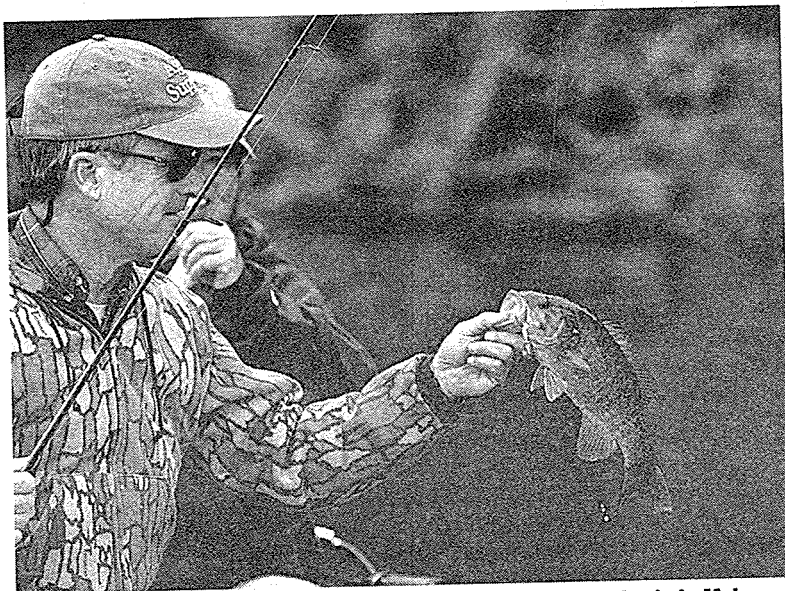
**JOE FITZGERALD
CHASING PISCES**

Every so often there is a pivotal moment in time, one that signifies an end to an era and ushers in another. These moments occur in our personal lives, in larger society, and in the natural world. Sometimes they all happen at once.

When I was introduced to sport-fishing, there were really only two fish: salmon and trout. Salmon were for when I could master the skill to hurl a finely crafted fly over a pristine pool like my grandfather. In the meantime, it was acceptable to cast a spinner and worm or minnow for brook trout, the salmon's smaller cousin and Nova Scotia's patron fish.

I can remember distinctly, however, one year in the 1970s when a new fish brazenly bullied its way onto the scene. Bass. I don't know where they came from, but smallmouth bass quickly established themselves as the top fish species in that lake system. And don't let their name fool you. Smallmouth bass have big mouths and they use them, aggressively snapping up anything edible.

The bad news for anglers was that the beloved brook trout didn't seem to be able to compete. The good news? Smallmouth bass are spectacular gamefish. They are not finicky like brook trout, they are active all summer, and when they hit, they pack a wallop. They almost always launch themselves airborne when hooked.



SMALLIE: A U.S. angler hooks a smallmouth bass, or bronzeback, in Maine.

Not long after that change, full cable television invaded Nova Scotia. Specialty fishing shows from the U.S. broadcast anglers fishing "bronzebacks" or "smallies" in tournaments with specialized methods and tackle. Today, bass fishing in Nova Scotia is extremely popular, and tournaments are held throughout the mainland.

Like a candy store

It was a warm, muggy afternoon when I set up on the shores of Kinsac Lake, near Beaver Bank. My tackle box looked like the counter of a candy store. I had colourful soft plastic baits with embedded sparkles that looked like gummy worms, skitter pops, senkos, gumball jigs and weedless rigs.

I started imitating the "good ol' boys" down south, pitching Texas-rigged senkos among lily pads. Within minutes, my artificial bait was struck hard, and moments af-

ter that, a good sized smallie erupted from the surface. Next up were poppers, plugs imitating fish that float and dip under water when pulled. Again I followed the prescribed techniques of the bassmasters. It took longer, but eventually my popper disappeared in a violent splash, and I engaged in another spirited fight.

It was now time for the big test. Excited by my success, I put away the bass tackle and geared up my fly rod. I tied on a big bug dry fly and found a vantage point. I cast the bug just feet away from the lily pads and watched intently. I started to strip the line, and on the second pull, the bug was engulfed.

Adapting to a changing world is essential to take advantage of its opportunities. I even think my grandfather would have enjoyed a leaping bronzeback on the fly.

Joe Fitzgerald is a freelance writer living in Halifax.

GETTING DOWN TO BASS FACTS

- Smallmouth bass are not native to Nova Scotia, and were introduced in 1942. Illegal introductions in the 1970s greatly increased their range, and they began to compete with native trout.
- They are considered a warm-water species, but have been steadily appearing in more northern Nova Scotia

water systems. There is major concern over smallmouth bass being caught in Lake Ainslie, Cape Breton, where they were not thought to be able to survive.

- They are spectacular fighters, and will readily take any type of lure, bait, or fly. Today, there is a massive assortment of bass tackle

available because of bass's importance as a tournament fish.

- They are a purely freshwater fish, and are found in rocky or weedy areas of lakes, and deeper, slow-moving streams. Their colour varies from brown to golden to olive green, with a white belly.

— Joe Fitzgerald