

# Finding fish in a belly-full river

Rivers across southern Wisconsin are still running belly-full halfway through June pushing fish into places and feeding attitudes some anglers struggle with.

With water volumes almost double the norm for this time of year, you might think fish would have twice as many places to hide. But in fact there are fewer habitats that fish find suitable.

Fish don't put a lot of thought into where to spend their time. They simply go with the flow, seeking a place where food is plentiful and the swimmin' is easy. Finding fish doesn't require deep thought right now.

In fact, the opposite is true.

In a river system, there is no such thing as water that is too shallow when it comes to holding fish—especially when water is substantially stained with runoff from perpetual rain.

Knee-deep water can hold whopping big fish when light penetration is only a couple of inches and food is available with little effort.

Bussey Creek, a small stream running into Lake Koshkonong, is a case in point. Most years this tributary is merely a trickle when “cotton” starts falling off of cottonwood trees.

Not this year.

The “cotton” has been filling the air like our last snowfall a few short weeks ago, and the catfish are feeding like big dogs up in Bussey Creek in places where a large minnow would have trouble navigating in mid-June with water levels a little closer to “normal.”

There are two forces that are pulling catfish into Bussey Creek right now: the urge to spawn and a bountiful food supply.

Typically, channel catfish spawn when water temperatures reach more than 78 degrees. Most years this is later in the summer when the “cotton” starts falling off the cottonwood trees.

Water temperatures are nowhere close to 78 degrees in Koshkonong and Rock River now. Why would catfish be thinking about spawning? Water temperatures might not be 78 degrees up in Bussey Creek right now, either. But I'll bet the water is warm enough in flooded flats along Bussey Creek right now for nature to take its course. Cotton falling from the cottonwood trees says it's so. Walleyes aren't supposed to spawn until water temperatures warm to about 48 degrees, either. But they got-erdone this year when the water was a chilly 42.

Minnows aren't the only big fish food that call Bussey Creek home in June. Insect hatches are coming off almost every evening now. Perpetual rain is adding a hearty buffet of worms and similar food.

Catfish aren't the only predators at the Bussey Creek chow line. Bluegills, walleyes, white bass and the alwayswilling sheephead are there too.

You won't see me at one of the "watering holes" near Lake Koshkonong for a while. Access points near Bussey Creek will be jammed with cars by this afternoon, with a few local anglers mad as hell about me spilling the beans.

Truth is, Bussey Creek probably isn't the best place to find fish in the Rock River system right now. It is mentioned merely to give you an idea where to start looking for fish when the river is running belly full.

The Rock is just a medium-sized river. When it is running belly full, even this river can be intimidating.

Prospects on the larger Wisconsin River are even more ominous.

The mighty Mississippi? Right off the intimidation charts.

Rock River is merely the combined flow of a couple dozen little Bussey Creeks that join the Bark and Crawfish rivers upstream from Koshkonong.

Think of a river as a giant living wiring harness with each tributary just another wire in the grand scheme of things. Some of these "wires" are more appealing than others because the water quality might be a little better or there might be more readily available food.

Fish don't want to fight the current of a raging river. But they do tend to move upstream when a river is on the rise. Often this means migrating into a smaller stream or quiet waters nearby.

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***Ted Peck***

Waukesha's Robin Radtke caught this nice smallmouth bass in a tributary stream last week. With area rivers still running about twice the depth as usual, tributaries are hot spots to fish.