

Eastern

Northeast
Sag Harbor
New York

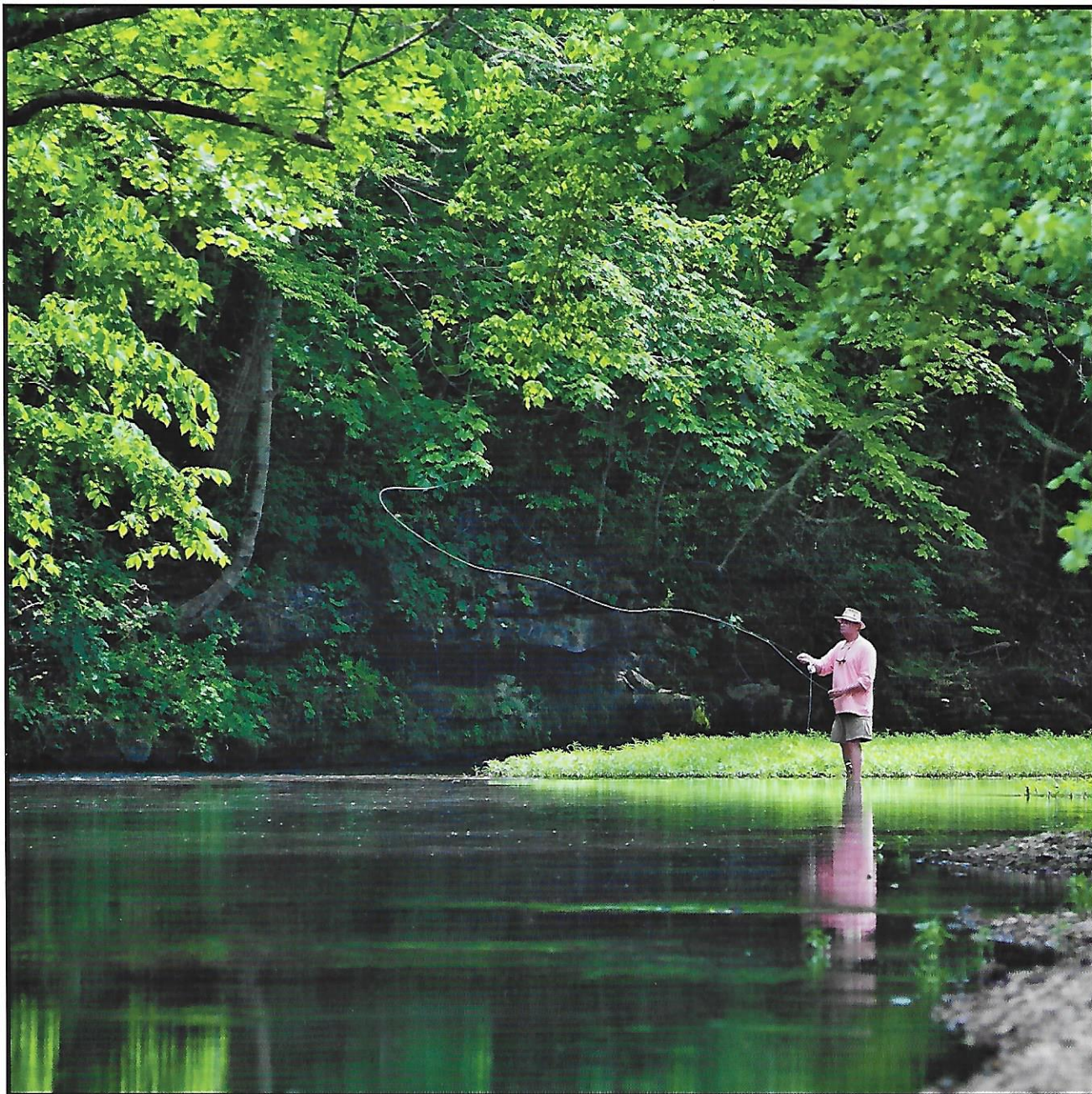
Southeast
Lake Norman
North Carolina

Midwest
Chicago Coast
Illinois

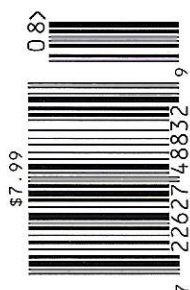
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Saint Croix River, ME

Boundary Water Down East

By King Montgomery

The last time I fished Maine's Saint Croix River above Woodland and below Grand Falls Dam, we launched at a ramp built by a local paper mill for public use. While my friend and guide Jeff McEvoy—owner of Weatherby's, The Fisherman's Resort, in nearby Grand Lake Stream—loaded the large canoe with our gear, I gazed across the river at New Brunswick, Canada.

The river on both the United States and Canada sides is lined with pines, spruce, balsam fir, river birch, other assorted hardwoods, and occasional grassland. More than 80 percent of Maine is covered by forests, and when you look down from high ground or scan an aerial photograph, green forests occupy most of your view. Shades of red, orange, and yellow greet the eye in the fall as the year yields to winter.

Just to the left of the boat ramp, a small cove was dotted with small lily pads boasting yellow flowers, and dragonflies and damselflies, mostly the latter on that day, flitted around the stems and the pads. Mating damselflies and dragonflies are easy fare for smallmouth bass, and I made note of that as we slipped the canoe into the water.

The Saint Croix forms the border between Maine and New Brunswick as it flows southward from the Chiputneticook Lakes, a series of glacially formed waters straddling the border. It flows for 71 miles through a string of lakes and streams near Grand Lake Stream plantation. (In Maine, plantations are defined areas that lack the population needed to achieve township status.) The East Branch flows through East Grand and Spednic Lakes and comprises about 30 river miles



of backcountry water that holds smallmouth bass and is popular among serious canoe and kayak buffs.

The two branches meet at the waters of the Grand Falls Flowage before continuing another 18 or so miles to the fall line near the twin towns of Calais, Maine, and Saint Stephen, New Brunswick. The river continues as a 16-mile estuary until it empties into Passamaquoddy Bay and the Gulf of Maine, not far from the Bay of Fundy. The tides

in this stretch of the Saint Croix rise and fall as much as 25 feet twice a day.

My earlier fishing excursions with McEvoy on stretches of the river below Vanceboro to the north and above Calais to the south had revealed wonderful smallmouth bass waters in beautiful, sparsely developed country, and I was hoping for the same on this trip.

McEvoy motored slowly upriver with the 9-horsepower outboard, anchoring near fishy-looking spots. I stood in the canoe and delivered my fly, which either came back unscathed or got whopped by a smallmouth intent on eating. Yes, I was standing in the canoe:



Author and stream ecologist Dennis LaBare lands a Saint Croix smallmouth bass. Two anglers can fish simultaneously in a Grand Laker (above). A Grand Laker is a sturdy, comfortable craft. A 9-horsepower outboard drives it along at a good clip. The original canoes did not have a square transom, but sterns that could hold an outboard were added in the 1930s and '40s (top). Weatherby's owner and head guide Jeff McEvoy casts into the pads while author and aquatic ecologist Dennis LaBare looks on. Yes, you can stand up and fish in a Grand Lake canoe (left).

our Grand Laker was almost 20 feet long and had a beam broad enough to provide a stable casting platform (as long as your cast wasn't a shorts-ripper that literally rocked the boat). On that subject, it's always a good idea to wear a personal flotation device. I favor the inflatable kind that isn't as restrictive as a traditional vest.

The trip showed me yet again that, for smallmouth fishing, the Saint Croix is truly remarkable.

A Touch of History

The Saint Croix region has hosted people for more than 6,000

years. The American and Canadian Indians lent their names to streams, rivers, and lakes, and those names remain: in Abenaki, Chiputneticook means "at the place of the big hill stream," and the Abenaki and Micmac name Passamaquoddy translates to "plenty pollock place."

The Passamaquoddy Indians, one the many subgroups of the Abenaki, still live along the Saint Croix, and their ancestors fished the river over the many centuries when there were no dams to stop the huge runs of shad, Atlantic salmon, striped bass, and other anadromous fish.

Some tribal members are sportfishing guides today.

The river valley was settled by Europeans, mostly French, more than 400 years ago. In fact, Saint Croix Island was the first capital of Acadia, three years before the English reached Jamestown in Virginia. Eventually, after a long series of wars, encroaching Europeans forced the Acadians to flee. The exiled people settled in what is now Louisiana, where they were called "Cajun"—a disparaging mispronunciation of "Acadian." The term "Cajun" and the rich culture associated with it are a source of pride in the 22 Louisiana parishes where the Acadians settled in the 17th century.

Picking your Spot

The Saint Croix is broken into sections by a series of dams that influence the character of the waters above and below them. During the 1800s and early 1900s—the heyday of lumbering—dams facilitated rafts of logs, but today they control floods and generate electricity.

The river is now a Canadian Heritage Waterway and offers gorgeous wilderness scenery, excellent canoe and

kayak water with some moderate white water, and excellent fishing for smallmouth

bass. Bald eagles, without regard for national boundaries, nest here in spring, raise their families during summer while enjoying the river's bounties, and move

to warmer climes as winter approaches. I always bring along a long camera lens when fishing in Maine; stunning photo opportunities appear around every bend in the rivers.

The short growing season in Maine affects the growth rate of the smallmouth bass: a 12-inch fish is an old-timer at 4 or 5 years old or more, and a lunker of 4 pounds is more than 10 years old. Some fish may be legally kept—check the current sportfishing

regulations—but most anglers practice catch-and-release.

Smallmouth bass and other river fish usually spawn in June and afterwards enjoy a brief time of plenty, feeding on crayfish, terrestrial and aquatic insects, amphibians, and the occasional small rodents. (Yes, mouse patterns work here.) Take a look around when you're on the water to see which life forms are active and look for submerged aquatic vegetation, rock ledges and boulders, downed trees, and changes in depth. Throw your fly near those places and they will come.

I like to start with top-water fishing because it's the most fun. I'm not a dry-fly-only guy, but it makes more sense to me to start fishing on top and work down until





The Saint Croix is loaded with smallmouth bass. The short growing season in Maine affects their growth rates: a 12-inch fish is four or five years old or more, and a lunker of 4 pounds is more than 10 years old.

I reach the bottom. I might begin with a damsel pattern—if they are on the water and I see bass splashing after them—or try a mouse pattern, which is a hoot to fish. Or I throw a more standard bass popper or slider over or along vegetation, into tailouts of faster-moving water, or along rocks and ledges that break the current. I'm particularly partial to deadfalls in water along the banks, and I don't overlook the occasional beaver lodge along the way because smallmouth bass live there too.

In faster water, it's a good idea to dead-drift a popper, particularly along a current seam. If the fly drags a bit, don't worry; bronzebacks will strike anyway. And work the fly partway back to the boat before picking it up for the next cast.

Cast a streamer down and across, and after it straightens out, retrieve it slowly. Smallmouth can hit at any time during a drift or retrieve. I like Clouser Deep Minnows in chartreuse/white, green or olive/white, black/white, or olive/yellow in several weights (depending on the water depth).

In addition to Clousers, I use streamers tied with Fish-Skulls or the new Sculpin Helmet heads. These unique heads—you have to see them to understand them—come in varying weights. You can

either tie your own creations or purchase finished flies.

If the bronzebacks aren't biting on your surface or subsurface offerings, try bouncing the bottom with a crayfish pattern in black, brown, or olive. A little orange or red in the fly also seems to help. Generally, use the lightest weight that will bounce on the bottom. If presentations throughout the water column aren't working, take a break. Talk with the guide or photograph the many wonders of nature around you, including those bald eagles. Eat an apple. Then begin fishing again. Just remember that fish don't eat all of the time and will ignore your offerings for hours or days—that's the way of life on the water.

A great institution is a traditional Maine shore lunch. For well over a century, Maine angling guides, who are schooled and registered by the state, have provided their "sports" with hearty lunches cooked over a wood fire or a portable propane grill. The main course once consisted of freshly caught fish, but most guides now bring along chicken, pork, or beef to go along with potatoes, onions, and tasty baked beans. If you have a preference, make sure you tell the guide well ahead of time.

Sculpin Bunny



PHOTO BY EASTERN FLY FISHING

- Hook:** 4XL down-eye streamer hook, size 4
- Thread:** Brown or olive 3/0
- Head:** Brown or olive small Fish-Skull Sculpin Helmet
- Eyes:** Gold 3 mm 3-D eyes
- Tail/back:** Hareline 1/8-in.-wide straight-cut rabbit strip
- Body/fins:** Hareline 1/8-in.-wide cross-cut rabbit strip



The Saint Croix River has gently flowing sections, constricted parts that cause rapids to form, and wide, slow stretches (above). Grand Lake canoe builder Bill Shamel uses the boat form that belonged to his father-in-law, "Pop" Moore, in the middle of the 20th century. There have been several excellent canoe makers in Grand Lake Stream from the 1930s to the present (below).

The best piece of equipment to have on a trip to the Saint Croix is a copy of DeLorme's *Maine Atlas & Gazetteer*, which shows virtually all of the launch points, large and small. During my excursions with guides from Weatherby's, I've never seen a boat with a motor larger than 9.9 horsepower, so leave your big bass boat at home.

Match the Hatch

Don't hesitate to cast top-water offerings during midday, even with the sun shining through a high, bluebird sky. Smallmouth bass look up frequently, both for serendipitous food and for avian predators, including osprey, great blue herons, and bald eagles. Aquatic vegetation offers cover and also provides shade, so a popper chugged past a weedbed could result in a noontime strike.

Again, keep an eye on what is going on around you. By observing nature at work, you improve your chances of catching fish. Are sunfish rising to cad-disflies or mayflies or midges? If so, cast a sunfish-colored streamer—olive with a touch of orange, perhaps—and let it sink below the sunfish, where the bass are waiting. Are fish jumping out of the water at damselflies or dragonflies? Match the flies' color and size as best you can and expect some action.

Lily pads and other nearshore aquatic vegetation are good places to focus your attention and, depending on what you see, your casts. Are bass chasing minnows, that catchall word used for a number of small baitfish? If so, drop a light streamer nearby and vary the retrieve until the fish tell you what they want—or don't want.

Look at the bottom when you can. Are crayfish scurrying around, or can you see them backed into

hiding places? Tie on a bottom-bouncing crayfish pattern—a Clouser Crayfish comes to mind—and see what happens. I believe crayfish are the preferred forage of Saint Croix River smallmouth. They seem plentiful, and several of the smallies we landed disgorged crayfish or crayfish parts.

Gear Up for Bronzebacks

Fly rods that cast a 6-, 7-, or 8-weight line are best on the Saint Croix. Anything lighter stresses the hooked fish too much, particularly in fast water. Rods of any length will do, but I've become partial to the 8-foot bass rods offered by

many manufacturers. Any appropriate reel works well to store a specialty bass line and backing. I typically begin a day's fishing with a fresh 9-foot leader and tippet, using a specialty tapered bass leader. Smallmouth bass aren't particularly leader-shy unless they're in very clear water, so



I use tippets from 8- to 15-pound test, depending on the conditions and the size of the fly I'm casting. Check your knots periodically and examine your leader for abrasion.

The flies already discussed are typical for smallmouth, but the best practice is to rely on your guide, who knows what has worked and what hasn't. If the guide's choices aren't producing, change to something else, even if the guide doesn't like it. More often than not, you'll catch fish with your choice of a different fly.

River Keepers

Two organizations keep watch over the Saint Croix River, both with an eye toward conservation of land and water while promoting responsible use of the resources.

The Downeast Lakes Land Trust, www.downeastlakes.org, a nonprofit group headquartered in Grand Lake Stream, contributes to the "long-term economic and environmental well-being of the Downeast Lakes Region through the conservation and exemplary management of its forests and waters." A good part of the river is protected from development, and the organization has prepared some primitive riverside campsites that are open to the public. These places also are used by Maine river guides for shore lunches and stretch breaks.

The trust, according to executive director Mark Berry, has partnered with the New England Forestry Foundation, the Woodie Wheaton Land Trust, and the state to help conserve 450,000 acres, including hundreds of miles of lakefront and a 50-mile corridor along the Saint Croix River.

The mission of the St. Croix International Waterway Commission, www.stcroix.org, formed in 1986 by the state of Maine and the province of New Brunswick, is "to plan for and facilitate delivery of a heritage management plan for the Saint Croix boundary corridor." The agreement stresses fair resource sharing, local partnerships, planning, conservation and protection of resources, and the like.

The Saint Croix River is wonderful smallmouth bass water that provides anglers with plenty of fish and the potential for some really nice ones, all set in a very pleasant environment. The trees, both deciduous and evergreen, are a treat to the eyes (and the camera), particularly in spring, when the young green of new leaves portends the arrival of bald eagles and bass anglers. More terrain eye candy appears in the fall when the leaves turn, revealing the true colors not masked by green chlorophyll.

The water runs clear in the Saint Croix, as it has since the last ice age, and it holds an abundance of fish just waiting for fly anglers to present the right fly at the right place and at the right time. You'll be surprised how often that can happen on this river named for a cross. ➡

King Montgomery, a frequent contributor to Eastern Fly Fishing, is a freelance writer-photographer from Burke, Virginia.

Saint Croix River NOTEBOOK



When: April–November; best June–August.

Where: Between the U.S. (ME) and Canada (New Brunswick).

Headquarters: Weatherby's, The Fisherman's Resort, www.weatherbys.com. **Information:** Grand Lake Stream Area Chamber of Commerce, www.grandlakesstream.org.

Appropriate gear: 6- to 8-wt. rods, floating line, 7- to 9-ft. leaders, 8- to 12-lb. tippets. Specialty bass rods work well.

Useful fly patterns: Walt's Poppers in black, chartreuse, and yellow; Woolly Buggers in black and olive, Sculpin Bunnies, Clouser Deep Minnows in different weights and colors, large grasshoppers and beetles (Chernobyl patterns), crayfish patterns in brown and black to bounce along the bottom.

Necessary accessories: Hat with brim, rain gear, good polarized sunglasses, sunscreen, insect repellent.

Nonresident license: \$11/1 day, \$23/3 days, \$64/annual. Available online at www.mefish-wildlife.com. Junior licenses available.

Fly shops/guides: *Grand Lake Stream:* Weatherby's, The Fisherman's Resort, (877) 796-5558, www.weatherbys.com; The Pine Tree Store, (207) 796-5027. *Freeport:* L.L.Bean, (877) 755-2326, www.llbean.com.

Maps: *Maine Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.

