

Spring 2004 Issue

Kentucky **AFIELD**

Don't go without it.

Big South Fork

Discover a wilderness boating and fishing experience in a trophy fish river

By Lee McClellan



Rock scrambling is required to bank fish along most sections of the Big South Fork in southeastern Kentucky. These tumbled boulders offer good cover for trophy fish.

Nature sliced huge chunks of sandstone from the rim of the Cumberland Plateau through the ages, leaving tumbled boulders resembling jagged rows of sharks' teeth lining the bank of the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River.

As you descend into the Big South Fork gorge of southeastern Kentucky, the river looks like an emerald rope squeezed between boulders the size of houses. Rocks that have tumbled into the river gave rise to rapids with names such as Angel Falls, Snaggletooth, Broken Rib and Devil's Jump.

Nature rules 90 miles of the Big South Fork River itself and the 125,000 acres of the federally owned Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area surrounding it. The land is home to black bears and

white-tailed deer while large fish swim in the river.

These big fish hide under the boulders waiting for a minnow or crayfish to tumble into their lair. Big South Fork in McCreary County has both beauty and the beasts: 6-pound smallmouth bass, muskellunge more than three feet long, stripers that straighten hooks and double digit walleye.

Fish grow large and fat in Lake Cumberland, then run up the Big South Fork. Walleye only run up the first couple of riffles, while the smallmouth in spring run further upstream to Devil's Jump rapid.

Riffles form a natural barrier where anglers and fish gather each spring. Tim King and his father, Noel, know about the big fish in the river, having fished it for decades.

"There are some really nice smallmouth that come up in the spring," said Tim King. "They come up in the river during their spawning runs. We fish at Devil's Jump rapid, that is our favorite place. Devil's Jump is a natural barrier for them."

King said the best smallmouth action occurs from late March through early May when there are good rains just prior to the spring spawning run.

An example of the size of fish found in Big South Fork is the 21½-inch, 6-pound smallmouth that Noel King caught on April 4, 2003. "That was a beauty that Dad caught," Tim King said. "He said the fish fought so hard he didn't know what he'd hooked."



Noel King of Stearns, Ky., caught this smallmouth bass during the spring run.

Later that month, King and his father caught four smallmouth in the river that were over 20 inches long. A smallmouth bass must be at least 20 inches long to qualify for Kentucky's trophy fish program.

Their catch included Tim King's 22¼-inch, brute bronzeback. That fish, a 5-pound, 13-ounce smallmouth, was hiding underneath an even

bigger fish. "I saw what must have been a 40-inch muskie behind a rock near the bank," Tim King recalled. "I threw my rig up in front of him and the minnow sank and I felt the tap, tap and set the hook. I thought for sure it was that muskie because he pulled so hard and swam all over. That was quite a sight when I cranked him up and saw it was a big brown smallmouth."

For bait, the Kings prefer creek chubs and minnows trapped out of local streams. They rig the chubs on a 3/0 hook with an 1/8-ounce or 1/4-ounce split-shot crimped about six inches above the hook. Reels are spooled with 10-pound line.

If the bite is slow, Tim King jerks his offering rapidly off the bottom as if he were hung up on a rock. "That will get their attention," he said. "Sometimes, that is the only way to get them to bite."

Tim King loves to catch big smallmouth bass, but he also enjoys fishing for largemouth and Kentucky (spotted) bass. "I caught a really big largemouth bass down by Devil's Jump a few years ago," he said. "I was fishing with a Rapala-like bait that I made and he took a swipe at it. I motioned to Dad to bring me a crawdad. I pitched it up near a rock so it wouldn't make a splash. The fish saw the crawfish and hit it hard. I about died when I saw how big he was. It weighed 8 pounds and is on my wall now."

WALLEYE

Big smallmouth aren't the only fish to target in spring on the Big South Fork. In early March, anglers line the banks between Worley and Blue Heron on moonless nights to cast long minnow-shaped baits into the darkness. They're hoping to fool one of the river's huge spawning walleye.

Stephens said Joe Shoal, located less than a mile downstream from the Blue Heron Coal Mining Community Museum, is a hot area for walleye. Recent fish shocking studies brought up a 10-pound and a 13-pound walleye.

McCreary County resident Michael Thomas fishes the river each spring for walleye, muskellunge and smallmouth bass. Thomas, an Eastern Kentucky University student studying to become a fisheries biologist, believes in big baits for big fish.

He prefers to 1/4- to 1/2-ounce jigs rigged with 4- to 6-inch soft plastic lures in the deep runs of the Big South Fork. Thomas also throws large minnow lures, chartreuse-colored diving crankbaits, white-and-

chartreuse doll flies, hair jigs or curly-tailed grubs.

He targets the deep runs and shoals between Worley and Blue Heron from early March through May. These lures have produced many nice walleye, a 42-inch muskellunge and a 7-pound, 4-ounce smallmouth bass.

MUSKELLUNGE and STRIPERS

The Big South Fork also has muskellunge that were originally stocked in Tennessee. "My uncle hooked 11 muskies last year but he lost them all," Tim King said.

Big striped bass from Lake Cumberland also venture up the Big South Fork. Last year, Tim King said he caught a 33-inch, 14-pound striper using a homemade minnow-shaped lure. But, King is convinced he's hooked even bigger fish. "I hooked one that bent my hook back," he said. "I fought him all over the place until he came off. It looked like someone took a pair of pliers and bent the hook over."

FLOATING THE BIG SOUTH FORK

The Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area was created in 1974 with a high quality wilderness experience for visitors in mind. From Leatherwood Ford in Tennessee downstream to Blue Heron in Kentucky, there is just one access point along 27 miles of river.

"The backpackers, paddlers and anglers wanted a wilderness experience," explained National Park Service biologist Steve Bakaletz, who works in the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area. "It was done for the solitude of having a two-day float trip. There is no vehicular traffic and it is very quiet."

Kentucky and Tennessee have a reciprocal fishing agreement in the Big South Fork. Either license allows anglers to fish from Leatherwood Ford downstream to the KY 92 bridge at Yamacraw.

The Kings float this stretch to cast for trophy-sized smallmouth bass. "We've floated down from the Tennessee side and caught some big smallmouths," Tim King said. "My biggest was a 5-pound, 13-ouncer that I caught right above the Bear Creek tributary. I caught him on an A.C. Shiner with a black back and silver sides. That was my first really big smallmouth. My dad caught a big one on a Tiny Torpedo with a yellow belly and a green back. There were grasshoppers falling out of the trees and into the river."

Anglers can make a three-day trip out of the float from Leatherwood

Ford to Blue Heron. However, Bakaletz suggests anglers launch at Station Camp instead.

"Each pool in the river gets progressively better as you get into Kentucky," he said. "The pool above Station Camp is great fishing. Station Camp to Blue Heron is a 15-hour trip without doing anything but paddling. Plan on two days if you plan to fish this stretch."

This section is good for anglers who are not expert whitewater paddlers. "There are no Class III rapids in this stretch," Bakaletz said. "You can easily get around the tough spots. There is a portage at Devil's Jump (a Class IV rapid) at the very end of the run. There is a trail to carry around it on the left."

Anglers may camp along the shore, but it is important to know the weather conditions and forecast before planning a trip. The Big South Fork lies within a deep gorge and any appreciable rainfall causes the river to rise quickly. Floating anglers, especially those in canoes, should be extremely cautious if the river is high. "That river can turn from placid to roaring in a hurry," Bakaletz warns.

Bakaletz loves the river for its uniqueness as well as the fishing. "It is a tremendous place to be in," he said. "After the second day on the river, you lose sense of time and responsibility. You can lose yourself out there. You don't see any people at all and are immersed in wildlife and nature. You have boulders the size of houses and these big bluffs above you as you float. There is no other river experience like it."

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