WISCONSIN

SMALLMOUTH BASS GUIDE

Lakes, rivers and Door County, month by month

Your guide to catching smallmouth bass in Wisconsin lakes, rivers and Great Lakes bays.



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Guide

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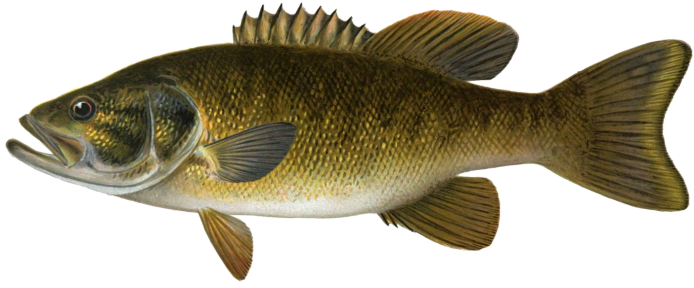

Wisconsin Smallmouth Bass Guide
First edition, October 2026

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Read this first. Fishing rules change every year and differ by lake. Everything about seasons, sizes and bag limits in this book is for the 2026–27 season, checked 2026-10-08. Always check the current Wisconsin DNR rules and your lake's own rules before you fish. Depth maps are not for navigation. Ice is never guaranteed safe. You are responsible for your own safety and for following the law.

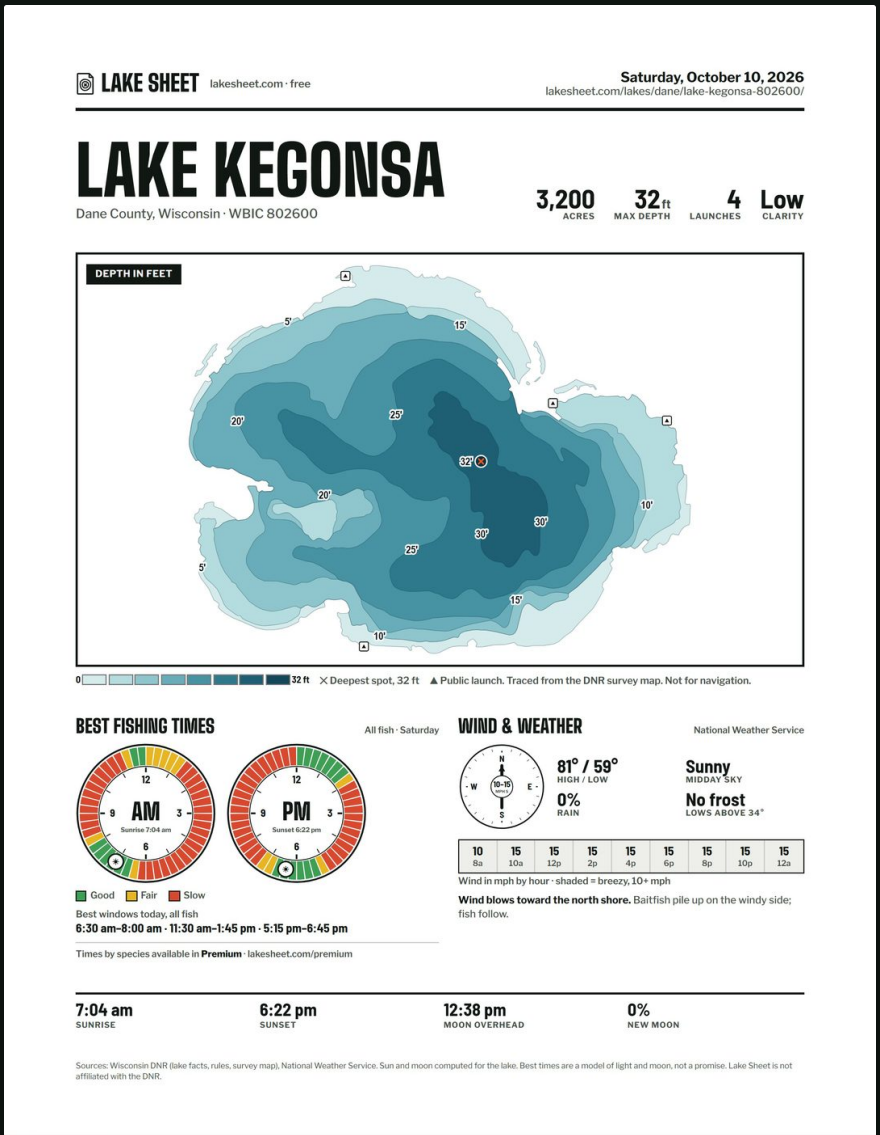
Lake Sheet is not affiliated with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Lake facts come from DNR survey and stocking records as published by Lake Sheet; see the sources at the back of the book.

lakesheet.com

FREE WITH THIS BOOK

YOUR FREE LAKE SHEET

Free for more than 4,600 Wisconsin lakes: two printable pages, made for the boat. This is the real sheet for Lake Kegonsa.



LAKE SHEET lakesheet.com · free

Saturday, October 10, 2026
lakesheet.com/lakes/dane/lake-kegonsa-802600/

LAKE KEGONSA

Dane County, Wisconsin · WBIC 802600

3,200	32 ft	4	Low
ACRES	MAX DEPTH	LAUNCHES	CLARITY

DEPTH IN FEET

5' 15' 20' 25' 32' 20' 10' 30' 30' 25' 5' 15' 10'

0 32 ft · ✕ Deepest spot, 32 ft · ▲ Public launch. Traced from the DNR survey map. Not for navigation.

BEST FISHING TIMES

All fish · Saturday

AM — Sunrise 7:04 am

PM — Sunset 6:22 pm

Good · Fair · Slow

Best windows today, all fish
6:30 am–8:00 am · 11:30 am–1:45 pm · 5:15 pm–6:45 pm

Times by species available in **Premium** · lakesheet.com/premium

WIND & WEATHER

National Weather Service

81° / 59°
HIGH / LOW

0%
RAIN

Sunny
MIDDAY SKY

No frost
LOWS ABOVE 34°

10	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
8a	10a	12p	2p	4p	6p	8p	10p	12a

Wind in mph by hour · shaded = breezy, 10+ mph

Wind blows toward the north shore. Baitfish pile up on the windy side; fish follow.

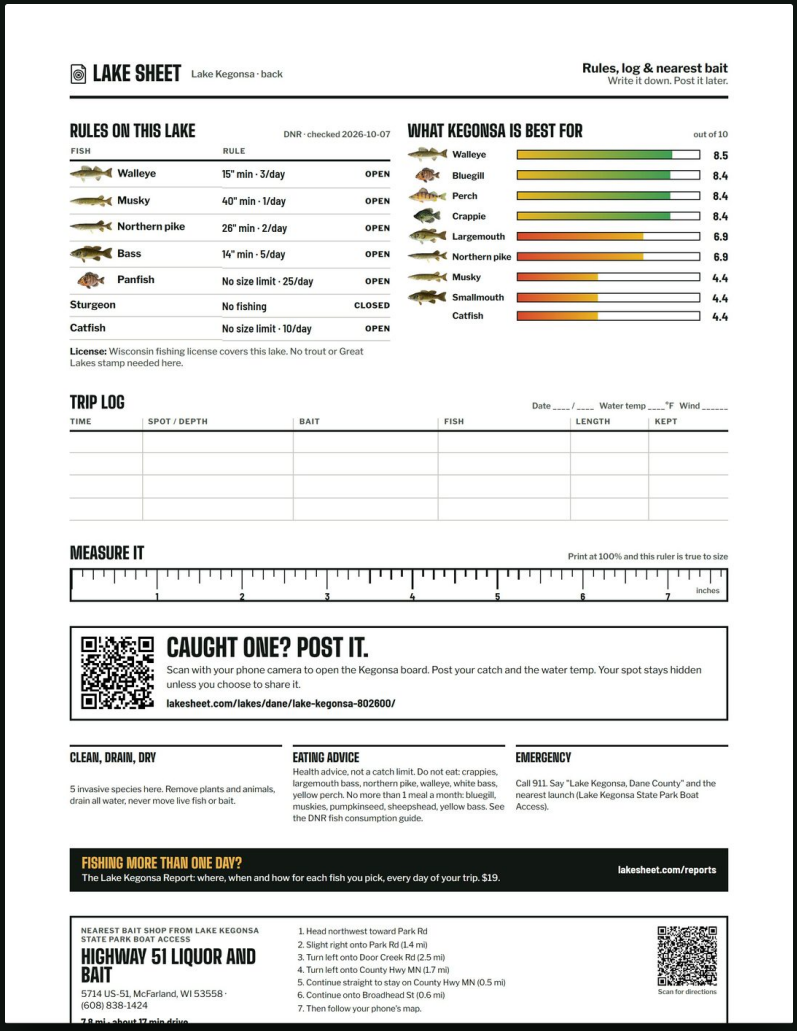
7:04 am	6:22 pm	12:38 pm	0%
SUNRISE	SUNSET	MOON OVERHEAD	NEW MOON

Sources: Wisconsin DNR (lake facts, rules, survey map), National Weather Service. Sun and moon computed for the lake. Best times are a model of light and moon, not a promise. Lake Sheet is not affiliated with the DNR.

1. **Depth map** traced from the DNR survey, deepest spot marked (traced lakes)
2. **Lake facts:** acres, max depth, launches, clarity
3. **Best times** from the sun and moon on AM and PM dials
4. **Wind and weather** by the hour, and which shore the wind hits
5. **Sun and moon** times for the lake
6. **Sources and date** on every fact

THE BACK OF THE SHEET

RULES, LOG & NEAREST BAIT



LAKE SHEET Lake Kegonsa · back

Rules, log & nearest bait
Write it down. Post it later.

RULES ON THIS LAKE

DNR · checked 2026-10-07

FISH	RULE	
Walleye	15" min · 3/day	OPEN
Musky	40" min · 1/day	OPEN
Northern pike	26" min · 2/day	OPEN
Bass	14" min · 5/day	OPEN
Panfish	No size limit · 25/day	OPEN
Sturgeon	No fishing	CLOSED
Catfish	No size limit · 10/day	OPEN

License: Wisconsin fishing license covers this lake. No trout or Great Lakes stamp needed here.

WHAT KEGONSA IS BEST FOR

out of 10

Walleye	8.5
Bluegill	8.4
Perch	8.4
Crappie	8.4
Largemouth	6.9
Northern pike	6.9
Musky	4.4
Smallmouth	4.4
Catfish	4.4

TRIP LOG

Date ____ / ____ Water temp ____°F Wind _____

TIME	SPOT / DEPTH	BAIT	FISH	LENGTH	KEPT

MEASURE IT

Print at 100% and this ruler is true to size

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 inches

CAUGHT ONE? POST IT.

Scan with your phone camera to open the Kegonsa board. Post your catch and the water temp. Your spot stays hidden unless you choose to share it.

lakesheet.com/lakes/dane/lake-kegonsa-802600/

CLEAN, DRAIN, DRY

5 invasive species here. Remove plants and animals, drain all water, never move live fish or bait.

EATING ADVICE

Health advice, not a catch limit. Do not eat: crappies, largemouth bass, northern pike, walleye, white bass, yellow perch. No more than 1 meal a month: bluegill, muskies, pumpkinseed, sheepshead, yellow bass. See the DNR fish consumption guide.

EMERGENCY

Call 911. Say "Lake Kegonsa, Dane County" and the nearest launch (Lake Kegonsa State Park Boat Access).

FISHING MORE THAN ONE DAY?
The Lake Kegonsa Report: where, when and how for each fish you pick, every day of your trip. $19.
lakesheet.com/reports

NEAREST BAIT SHOP FROM LAKE KEGONSA STATE PARK BOAT ACCESS

HIGHWAY 51 LIQUOR AND BAIT

5714 US-51, McFarland, WI 53558 · (608) 838-1424

7.8 mi · about 17 min drive

1. Head northwest toward Park Rd
2. Slight right onto Park Rd (1.4 mi)
3. Turn left onto Door Creek Rd (2.5 mi)
4. Turn left onto County Hwy MN (1.7 mi)
5. Continue straight to stay on County Hwy MN (0.5 mi)
6. Continue onto Broadhead St (0.6 mi)
7. Then follow your phone's map.

Scan for directions

1. **This lake's rules** for every fish, from the DNR
2. **What the lake is best for,** rated by fish
3. **Trip log** and a true-size **ruler**
4. **Invasive species** and eating advice
5. **Nearest bait shop** we know of, with turn-by-turn directions
6. Scan to post your catch

lakesheet.com

Find your lake, print it, take it in the boat

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is built to be used, not just read. Read Chapter 1 once so you can tell a smallmouth from a largemouth at a glance. After that, jump to the month you're fishing in Chapter 3, find a lake in Chapter 7, and use Chapter 6 to plan where to start on it. If you fish rivers or Door County, Chapter 2 tells you where to go and Chapter 8 tells you which rules apply there.

IF YOU HAVE ONE EVENING

1. Look up your lake's free Lake Sheet (page 2).
2. Read your month in Chapter 3.
3. Tie on the tube jig from Chapter 5.
4. Start on the windy rocky point, in the first green window on the sheet's best-times dials.

IF YOU'RE NEW TO SMALLMOUTH

1. Chapter 1: what you're after.
2. Chapter 4: buy the budget kit.
3. Chapter 5: learn the tube and the drop shot first.
4. Chapter 10: the questions everyone asks.

Lakes, rivers and the Great Lakes. Smallmouth live in all three, and this book covers all three. Only inland lakes have Lake Sheets. Rivers such as the Wisconsin, Namekagon and Menominee, and Great Lakes waters such as Green Bay, Sturgeon Bay and the Door County shore, are not Lake Sheet lakes, so they get their own sections, with DNR survey facts instead of QR codes.

The QR codes. Every lake named in this book with a code is a Lake Sheet lake. Scan it with your phone camera and you land on that lake's free Lake Sheet: depth map, best times, wind, launches, the nearest bait shop and the lake's own rules.

The rules. Smallmouth rules depend on where you are: Wisconsin has a Northern and a Southern bass zone, Green Bay and Door County have their own season, and hundreds of lakes have special limits. Rules in this book are for the 2026–27 season. Before you keep a fish, check the current rules. The fastest way is the rules box on your lake's Lake Sheet.



CHAPTER 1

MEET THE SMALLMOUTH BASS

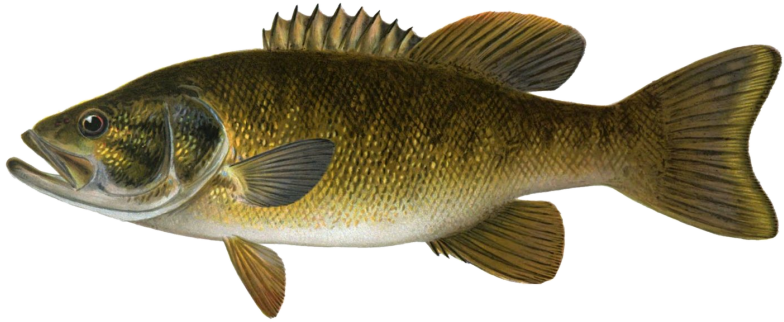
The smallmouth is the fish of clear water and rock: boulder points on northern lakes, riffles and pools on the Namekagon and the Wisconsin River, limestone shelves along the Door County shore. The Wisconsin DNR calls it, "pound for pound, the scrappiest fish of all in Wisconsin." It jumps, it pulls hard for its size, and it lives in some of the prettiest water in the state. Almost everything about where it lives and what it bites comes back to two things: rock, and crayfish.

1.1 How to tell a smallmouth · **1.2** Smallmouth, largemouth and rock bass · **1.3** Size, growth and records · **1.4** What smallmouth eat · **1.5** Spawning and the nest · **1.6** How smallmouth live

1.1
HOW TO TELL A SMALLMOUTH

SMALLMOUTH BASS

Micropterus dolomieu



TELL IT BY	Upper jaw does not reach past the eye. Red eye, with dark wavy lines running back from it. Dark vertical bands on the sides. Only a shallow notch between the two parts of the back fin.
LOOKS LIKE	Largemouth bass: upper jaw reaches past the eye, a broken stripe along the side, a deep notch in the back fin. Rock bass: large red eye too, but six spines in the bottom fin and rows of spots.
COLOR	Mottled dark green to bronze or pale gold. Fish from dark, stained water look darker.
SIZE	Most Wisconsin smallmouth run 10 to 16 inches and ½ to 2 lb; 18 inches is a big one. An 18-inch fish weighs about 2.9 lb; a 20-incher about 4 lb.
WISCONSIN RECORD	9 lb 1 oz — Leon Stefonek, Indian Lake, Oneida County, June 21, 1950
EATS	Crayfish first, then small fish, insect larvae such as hellgrammites and dragonfly nymphs, and frogs.

The genus name, *Micropterus*, means "small fin"; *dolomieu* honors M. Dolomieu, a French mineralogist, according to the DNR. Anglers call smallmouth "smallies" and "bronzebacks" for the brassy color that shows when one rolls at the surface.

Color is the least reliable clue. A smallmouth from a dark, stained flowage can look almost black; one from a sandy Door County bay can look pale

gold. The dark vertical bars come and go, too: they show up strongly when a fish is excited or freshly caught and fade when it calms down. **Go by the mouth and the fins, not the color.**

1.2 SMALLMOUTH, LARGEMOUTH AND ROCK BASS

Most Wisconsin lakes with smallmouth also hold largemouth. Of the 645 lakes on Lake Sheet where the DNR survey lists smallmouth, 598 list largemouth too. You will catch both, often on the same lure, and the rules on some lakes treat them differently. Learn the jaw test and you'll never mix them up.



FIG 1.1 **Smallmouth bass.** The upper jaw stops below the eye. The two parts of the back fin are joined with only a shallow dip. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service illustration (Duane Raver).



FIG 1.2 **Largemouth bass.** The upper jaw reaches past the back of the eye, and a deep notch nearly splits the back fin in two. Sherman Foote Denton, 1896.

	SMALLMOUTH BASS	LARGEMOUTH BASS	ROCK BASS
Upper jaw	Does not reach past the eye	Reaches past the back of the eye	–
Back (dorsal) fin	Shallow notch between spiny and soft parts	Deep notch; almost two fins	–
Eye	Red	–	Large and red
Body	Bronze, green or pale gold, often with dark vertical bands	Green, often with a broken stripe along the side	Six spines in the bottom (anal) fin; rows of spots
Where in Wisconsin	Rocky, clear lakes; medium and large rivers; Great Lakes bays	Weedy, warm lakes, ponds and backwaters statewide	Rocky lakes and rivers, often with smallmouth

Wisconsin record	9 lb 1 oz (1950)	11 lb 3 oz (1940)	2 lb 15 oz (1990)

THE ONE-SECOND JAW TEST

Close the fish's mouth and look at the corner of the upper lip. If it ends under the eye, it's a smallmouth. If it runs past the back of the eye, it's a largemouth. This works on a 6-inch fish and a 6-pound fish.

Why it matters. Largemouth and smallmouth share one daily bag of 5, but in the Northern Zone you may keep smallmouth only from June 20, and many northern lakes allow only one smallmouth over 18 inches (Chapter 8).

1.3

SIZE, GROWTH AND RECORDS

Smallmouth grow slowly in Wisconsin. Growth depends on the water: fish in rich, warm southern rivers grow faster than fish in cold, clear northern lakes. Both bass species mature at 3 to 4 years old, at about 9 to 11 inches, according to the DNR's bass management plan.

AGE	PLOVER RIVER (CENTRAL WI)	RED CEDAR RIVER (WEST-CENTRAL WI)
1 year	3.6 in	3.9 in
2 years	6.2 in	7.5 in
3 years	8.7 in	10.8 in
4 years	11.7 in	13.0 in
5 years	14.4 in	15.1 in
6 years	16.1 in	16.0 in
7 years	17.3 in	16.7 in
8 years	17.9 in	17.5 in
9 years	18.7 in	–

Average length at each age, from a University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point study of two Wisconsin rivers (Paragamian, 1973), converted from millimeters.

Newer DNR surveys tell the same story:

- **Namekagon River, 2025.** Smallmouth took about **6 years to reach 14 inches and 11 years to reach 18 inches**, similar to the Couderay and Menominee rivers.
- **Door County (Sturgeon Bay area), 2021.** Growth has sped up. In the 1990s an average fish didn't reach 14 inches until age 6 or 7; now most get there by age 4, and some by age 3.
- **Clear Lake, Oneida County, 1974–75.** Fish ran from about 3.6 inches at age 1 to 19 inches at age 11.

How much does it weigh? Measure the fish, then use this table. It's a statewide average from the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission; a fat fall fish weighs more, a skinny spring male less.

LENGTH	WEIGHT	LENGTH	WEIGHT
12 in	0.8 lb	18 in	2.9 lb
13 in	1.1 lb	19 in	3.5 lb
14 in	1.3 lb	20 in	4.1 lb
15 in	1.7 lb	21 in	4.7 lb
16 in	2.0 lb	22 in	5.5 lb
17 in	2.4 lb	23 in	6.3 lb

How big is big? In the DNR's 2025 Namekagon River survey, 30% of smallmouth in the upper river were over 14 inches and only 4% were over 18. In the lower river, 16% were over 14 and 1% over 18. A 17-inch smallmouth is a good fish anywhere in Wisconsin, and a 20-inch, 4-pound fish is a trophy most anglers catch only a few times in their lives. Door County is the exception: in the DNR's spring 2021 survey near Sturgeon Bay, fish averaged 16.9 inches and 34% were 18 inches or longer.

The records. Wisconsin's hook-and-line record smallmouth weighed **9 lb 1 oz**. Leon Stefonek caught it on Indian Lake in Oneida County on June 21, 1950, and it still stands. The live-release (length) record is **23.0 inches**, caught and released by Anthony Schlader on Nebish Lake in Vilas County on June 20, 2024.

1.4
WHAT SMALLMOUTH EAT

The DNR calls the crayfish the smallmouth's favorite food, and Wisconsin studies back that up:

STUDY	CRAYFISH	FISH	INSECTS
Clear Lake, Oneida County (1974–75)	74% of food items by number	–	–
Red Cedar River (summer)	Found in 40% of stomachs	26%	24%
Plover River (summer)	Found in 24% of stomachs	48%	–

The rest of the menu: small fish, aquatic insects such as hellgrammites and dragonfly nymphs (the DNR names both as top natural baits), and frogs.



FIG 1.3 A live crayfish, caught on a Wisconsin lake. Brown, green and orange tubes and craws copy it.



FIG 1.4 A dragonfly nymph. In rivers, these and hellgrammites are smallmouth staples.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BAIT

Match the crayfish: a brown, green-pumpkin or orange tube, craw or jig, hopped along rock. In rivers, add small minnow and insect imitations. **One rule:** in Wisconsin it's illegal to have live crayfish with fishing gear on any inland water except the Mississippi River (Chapter 8). Use imitations.

1.5
SPAWNING AND THE NEST

Smallmouth are nest builders, and that nest explains much of their spring behavior and most of the spring rules.

- **When.** In Wisconsin smallmouth usually spawn at water temperatures of **62 to 64°F**, though they've been found spawning at 53°F. In southern Wisconsin that's mid-May through June. On the St. Croix River, spawning has been recorded from May 11 to June 7. In northern lakes, mid-May through June, depending on the year.
- **Where.** On clean rock or gravel: rocky shoals, river shallows and backwaters. In lakes, smallmouth nest first on the **north and west shorelines**, which warm faster and are sheltered from the prevailing wind. Nests are often beside a boulder or log. Bass nests average about 2 feet deep in stained water; in clear lakes and Door County they are often 4 to 10 feet down.
- **The nest.** The male fans out a round, clean gravel bowl, sometimes building several "practice nests" before he settles on one. The female lays her eggs and leaves. **The male guards** the eggs and then the fry against everything, including fish many times his size.
- **The young.** Bass fry stay in the nest 6 to 15 days, then school near it for another 10 to 28 days before scattering along the shore.

WHY THE EARLY SEASON IS CATCH AND RELEASE

A male pulled off his nest leaves it open to panfish and minnows. In a Minnesota study the DNR's bass plan cites, nests whose male was removed lost all their young within 2 days. Males that are caught and released quickly usually go right back. That's why the Northern Zone is catch and release only until June 20, why Door County and Green Bay are catch and release until July 1, and why you should land and release spring fish fast (Chapter 8).

Largemouth spawn about the same time but usually first, in shallower, weedy, protected bays. If you see a nest on sand or in weeds in a back bay, it's probably a largemouth's; a nest on gravel off a rocky point is probably a smallmouth's.

1.6 HOW SMALLMOUTH LIVE

In lakes. Smallmouth like big, deep, clear lakes with rocky or sandy bottoms. The DNR's bass plan describes the ideal: over 20 feet deep, with rooted weeds and clean gravel shores. They stay mostly in water **shallower**

than 15 feet in spring and early summer, deeper on clear lakes in late summer and fall (Chapter 3), near rock, logs and weed edges, and move to deeper water for winter.

In rivers. Adults hold in moderate to swift current over rock; young fish stay in eddies along the banks. River smallmouth can **travel long distances** with the seasons. In the Wolf and Embarrass rivers they make large seasonal migrations, and tagged Wisconsin River smallmouth have moved 9 to 13 miles upstream in under 16 days. In winter they gather in deep, slow pools.

In the Great Lakes. Door County and Green Bay smallmouth spend most of their lives in the nearshore shallows, move into protected bays and harbors to spawn, and scatter onto rocky flats and reefs in summer.



CHAPTER 2

WHERE SMALLMOUTH LIVE IN WISCONSIN

Smallmouth are native to Wisconsin, and they live in all three of the state's drainage basins: Lake Michigan, the Mississippi and Lake Superior. The DNR says they were probably spread across the state much as they are now before anyone stocked a fish. You'll find them in three very different kinds of water, and this chapter covers each one: inland lakes, rivers, and the Great Lakes bays.

2.1 Three kinds of smallmouth water · **2.2** Inland lakes · **2.3** Rivers · **2.4** Door County, Green Bay and Sturgeon Bay · **2.5** Lake Superior · **2.6** Stocking · **2.7** Does my lake have smallmouth?

2.1
THREE KINDS OF SMALLMOUTH WATER

	INLAND LAKES	RIVERS	GREAT LAKES BAYS
Examples	Vilas, Oneida and Sawyer county lakes; Geneva Lake; Green Lake	Wisconsin, Namekagon, Flambeau, Chippewa, Menominee, St. Croix, Wolf	Sturgeon Bay, Little Sturgeon Bay, Green Bay shore, Door County's Lake Michigan side
Lake Sheet?	**Yes**: a free sheet for each lake, with depth map, rules and launches	**No**: rivers are not Lake Sheet lakes	**No**: Great Lakes waters are not Lake Sheet lakes
Best months	June–October	May–October	July (after the opener)–October
Rules	Northern or Southern Zone, plus the lake's own rules	Zone rules, border-water rules or river-specific rules	Their own season: catch and release until July 1
This book	Chapters 3, 6, 7	Section 2.3 and 5.8	Section 2.4

2.2
INLAND LAKES

Smallmouth live in fewer lakes than largemouth, but they're the big, clear, rocky ones. Of the 4,090 lakes with a Lake Sheet as of October 2026, the DNR fish survey lists smallmouth in **645**. The DNR rates them **abundant** in 17 of those lakes, **common** in 163 and **present** in 465. Largemouth are listed in 3,436.

COUNTY	LAKES WITH SMALLMOUTH IN THE DNR SURVEY	RATED "ABUNDANT"
Vilas	159	2
Oneida	101	–
Sawyer	48	1
Bayfield	40	3
Iron	32	–
Forest	16	2