

# Topwater to Bottom: Cracking the Code on Smallmouth Bass

## With Jake Villwock

**D. Roger Maves:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio, your source for learning more about fly fishing in cold water, warm water, and saltwater. Hello, I'm Roger Maves, your host for tonight's show. On this broadcast, we'll be featuring Jake Villwock, and he'll be answering your questions on Topwater to Bottom: Cracking the Code on Smallmouth Bass.

This show will be 90 minutes in length, and we're broadcasting live over the internet. If you'd like to ask Jake a question, just go to our homepage at [askaboutflyfishing.com](http://askaboutflyfishing.com). Use that Q&A text box to send us your question, and we'll receive your question immediately, and we'll try to answer as many of them as possible on the show tonight.

And while you're there, make sure you sign up to receive our announcements so you don't miss out on any of our future broadcasts. Just fill out the form on the right side of our homepage, and we'll let you know when the next live show will be. This broadcast is being recorded and will be available for playback on our website about 48 hours after the show ends.

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When we return, we'll be talking with Jake Villwock about Topwater to Bottom: Cracking the Code on Smallmouth Bass.

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Before we introduce Jake, I'd like to let you know about the great prizes we have to give away tonight. For our drawing tonight, we'll be giving away a one-year membership to Fly Fishers International and a one-year membership to Trout Unlimited. Now, if you haven't registered yet for the drawing, you can do so now.

Just go to our homepage at [askaboutflyfishing.com](http://askaboutflyfishing.com) and look for the link under tonight's section that says register for our free drawing. Click on that link, fill out the form, and we'll announce the winners at the end of the show. We'll also be giving away a copy of Jake's latest book, Favorite Flies for Smallmouth Bass, and that's courtesy of Stackpole Books.

To find out more about what Stackpole Books offers, you can go to [stackpolebooks.com](http://stackpolebooks.com) and find out about all the different kinds of fly fishing books that they publish.

So here's how you can win. You must be the first person to answer the question I ask at the end of the show. The question will be [00:03:00] about something that Jake and I talk about during the show, and you must submit your answer along with your name and location in the text box on our homepage.

So listen closely and use your best typing skills, take notes, pay attention, all that kind of stuff, and you may be the proud winner of Jake's latest book, Favorite Flies for Smallmouth Bass.

Tonight, our guest is Jake Villwock. Jake has been an industry professional for over 14 years. Growing up in commercial fishing family on Eastern Shore of Maryland, fishing has been part of his life from day one, so it should come as no surprise that he's chosen a career in the fishing industry.

After graduating from High Point University with a business degree, Jake worked as a deckhand and a fly fishing guide in Sitka, Alaska. He spent the winters, dog sledding in both Fairbanks and Deep Creek, Maryland. Moving back to the East Coast in 2009, Jake worked for TCO's Fly Shop at Reading, Pennsylvania, and Bryn Mawr, [00:04:00] Pennsylvania, locations, and helped open and manage their location in Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania.

After eight years as a full-time retail manager with TCO, Jake decided to start his own business, Relentless Fly Fishing, which will serve as a contract guide service for three TCO Fly Shop locations. Jake guides in Pennsylvania and New York for trout, smallmouth, and steelhead. He has a true passion for warm water, and it's hard to find him anywhere but a smallmouth river from early spring to late fall.

When he is not rowing a boat, he's most likely crawling around a local spring creek chasing picky wild fish. In addition to guiding, Jake is the author of Smallmouth Bass Flies: Top to Bottom and Favorite Flies for Smallmouth Bass. He's a Fulling Mill signature tier, blog writer, contributor to Fly Fisher Magazine and Eastern Fly Fishing Magazine, and serves on various pro staffs of leading industry companies such as Hatch Reels, Scientific Angler, Simms Fishing, Clacka Craft Drift [00:05:00] Boats, and Scott Fly Rods.

Jake, welcome back to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio.

**Jake Villwock:** Hey, thanks for having me back. I appreciate it.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, good to have you back. And sorry, folks, if you tried to tune in a couple of times for Jake's show. I was sick as a dog for like, three weeks, and then Jake just told me he got sick. I didn't even know that.

So, uh, both of us were kind of out of commission for several weeks there. But we are here today, both healthy and ready to go. So, um, ready to answer all those questions you have, and we'll get those answered. So again, if you have something you'd like to ask, just go to our homepage, and you can put in that form your question, and we'll try to get it answered on the show tonight.

So Jake, what first drew to you to smallmouth bass on the fly, and what keeps you obsessed with them today?

**Jake Villwock:** I would have to say that the wildness of smallmouth. In Pennsylvania, there's a few trout rivers you can float, but [00:06:00] there's not that many, and I found smallmouth back in 2010, actually 2009, right when I started working for TCO, and it was just a really cool adventure to kind of find them, figure them out. I didn't know a lot about them, and the thing that keeps me obsessed with them is the fact that they're forever changing. They're always moving, and they just have an attitude of anger.

You catch one and they fight you till the very last second, and then you go to let them go and they slap their tail on the water and you get water in your face, and they're just like, "Yeah, thanks for nothing, buddy," and they take off.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Jake Villwock:** Um, and the other thing that I love about them is they're, they can be super technical. They're not just bass. They're a freshwater predator, and we'll have them patterning mayflies some days, and then we'll have them look, coming up and staring at poppers and not eating them, and you, you know, it's a big puzzle. So that's what I like about it. It's always changing.

**D. Roger Maves:** Trust me. Yeah. Yeah, they are feisty little buggers, aren't they?

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Well, [00:07:00] cool. Yeah. Let's talk about gear first. Tonight we're gonna break the show down into kinda three sections, topwater zone, midcolumn zone, and then bottom zone, and the different aspects of fishing those different zones.

But first, because we had a bunch of questions come in from the audience about gear, so let's kinda clear up the gear thing first, and then we'll go into those different zones and talk about those.

First off, Dan in Illinois says, "What are good weights of fly lines and leaders for both topwater and wet fly fishing for smallmouth?"

**Jake Villwock:** Depending on what you're throwing and how far you have to throw it, six weights can work totally fine. I mean, we use all those a lot in the summertime when we're throwing smaller bugs, but if you want one to do it all, a seven weight is definitely the one that can kind of get it all done. We can throw frogs with them, we can present dry flies on six pound tippet, and we can throw four, five, six-inch streamers with them, so they work just fine.

I will say that [00:08:00] I tell people all the time, I've never met a smallmouth that a six weight can't handle, but I've met plenty of smallmouth flies that a six weight can't handle. So it kind of depends-

**D. Roger Maves:** Huh ...

**Jake Villwock:** On what you're gonna be throwing, but if you want one to do it all, get a seven weight. They're a perfect rod for that.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, so what I hear you saying is it's not about, uh, fighting the fish, it's about being able to throw bigger bugs with that seven weight. Yeah.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah, so like right now we're in our spring season, so we're throwing deer hair frogs on the surface, and we're throwing anywhere from four to six-inch streamers, and sometimes those bigger streamers just can't be handled on six weights. So we run sevens and eights in the spring, and sixes and sevens in the summer.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. Okay. Charlie in Minnesota, this is a long one, but let me read the whole thing. "I fish for smallies on rivers in Minnesota and Wisconsin. One to three times a summer, I'll catch a three-quarter pound to four pounder. I will catch a fair amount of [00:09:00] fish in the one to two and a half pound range.

I use Dahlberg drivers, pop- divers, poppers, and various mid-size two to four-inch streamers such as minnows, conehead muddlers, and dequeeles. I am in a drift boat and set up one eight weight rod with a streamer and a second eight weight rod with a popper or diver. I'm not worried about the northerns or muskies, although they occasionally steal a fly from me.

Given that info, what leaders would you suggest I buy and/or construct for my smallmouth fishing? Might I one leader for the surface flies and a leader of different construction for the streamers? I've been told by a few people that I only need five feet of straight 16 pound tippet for my leader.

Others have suggested that on calm days I would be doing better with a tapered nine-foot leader if I'm using poppers or divers. What are your thoughts on leaders and tippets for smallmouth?"

**Jake Villwock:** That is a great question. So when it [00:10:00] comes to topwater, I'll kind of, I'll tackle that one first. You know, just a standard bass leader from any manufacturer is, is a great option.

The bass leaders themselves have been, are designed to throw bigger bugs, so three quarters of that leader is kind of the butt section, and then there's a quick taper down to the tippet section. So throwing frogs and stuff with a nine-foot leader, you can totally do without having an issue turning over.

However, when I'm in, like this time of year right now where we're throwing frogs, and even right now we've got the lowest water we've had in probably 40 years on the rivers, I'm running, for my topwater section or my topwater leader, I'm running two feet of 40 pound hard mono, two feet of 30 pound hard mono, and two feet of 20 pound, so six feet, and then I do a little tiny 25 pound micro swivel and about 18 inches of tippet off of that. So total leader length is about seven and a half feet, and that turns over and is very accurate when it comes to [00:11:00] throwing bigger deer hair bugs.

If you are gonna get into that, you know, smaller foam bug stuff in the middle of the summertime, nine to 12 foot leaders work best, and I just run a regular tapered leader, nine-foot leader and run tippet off of that.

When it comes to streamers, uh, I'm very similar leader. I don't... I personally like having a slightly tapered leader for all flies. It just turns the fly over a little bit better, and you have more accuracy and control with it. So just like my topwater leader, I'm gonna run a very similar setup, so two, two, and two, and it's gonna be 30, 25, 20 to a swivel, and then you can drop down to 16, 12, 10, 8 after that.

So, and I run a full fluorocarbon leader with all of my streamers. You know, it can be a little expensive to buy a bunch of spools of fluorocarbon, but a fluorocarbon leader costs about 15 bucks if you buy it at a fly shop, and you can buy enough to tie 100 leaders for 60 bucks or something [00:12:00] like that.

That's kinda where I'm at with that, and then tippet size, I know somebody asked a question about that earlier. You know, it totally depends on the time of year, the clarity, and what you're throwing. So if I can get away with throwing 16 and 20 pound as my tippet, I will. But there's plenty of times in the middle of the summertime where we're, we're throwing stuff as small as six pounds.

**D. Roger Maves:** Hmm. Okay. Okay. Still not too complicated, though. Pretty simple setup. You got a formula there that sounds easy to duplicate, so good. Yeah. Yeah, that kind of, hopefully that answers Steven Keller's question from Illinois.

Bill in Maine asked, "Do you prefer one versatile rod or multiple dedicated setups when covering topwater and subsurface, and why?"

**Jake Villwock:** Honestly, if you're fishing, so this is one of those seasonal things where, like, if I'm fishing the summertime, you can absolutely get away with fishing a single six or seven weight with a floating line for subsurface and [00:13:00] topwater, and just sometimes you have to change your leader length and things like that.

But in the springtime, or I should say spring or fall, I like to have a dedicated rod for topwater and a dedicated rod for subsurface, whether it be crayfish or more of a swim fly bait fish style deal, just because I can switch back and forth pretty quick. And a lot of times with the unweighted bait fish patterns, you've gotta have an intermediate line to kinda get them down into the column a little bit more. So summertime you can get away with one rod. Springtime and fall, I would say have two dedicated rods for different setups. Or you could be like me right now, like you get on my boat and I look like a Bassmaster. I've got six different rods and every single one's rigged up differently for different stuff, so I can just grab a rod, hand it to a client, and say, "Okay, there's fish rising to mayflies right now. We've got this six weight set up for that. We've got a seven weight set up for frogs. We've got crayfish rods set up, and we've got two other streamer rods." So I guess technically it's five rods, not six, but yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. [00:14:00] Well, you're a guide, it, it's kind of expected that you would be, uh, all rigged up like that, which keeps you in the water, right?

Yeah, you don't catch fish rigging rods, right?

**Jake Villwock:** That's right.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Jake Villwock:** Somebody told me once a long time ago, he said, "The best way to catch fish, put your fly in the water." I was like, "Hmm, that's-"

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Jake Villwock:** "... That's groundbreaking."

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah, right. Yeah, well, you know, recently our, my son and I went to Chile and we were, we were fishing a small river with a rubber raft, and the guide, the guide had all he could do to, you know, to keep the line in the... I mean, the line, the boat in the river and avoid obstacles and stuff. And boy, we had to be able to switch quickly. I mean, if we broke off or lost, he'd just hand us another rod, 'cause he was all rigged up, ready to go, and we just kept fishing.

Didn't miss a beat.

**Jake Villwock:** Oh, yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** We really appreciated that, 'cause it was fast water, we were moving fast, hitting the banks with streamers and, yeah, it made all the difference in the world.

Yeah. Okay, so here's some [00:15:00] general strategy tactic questions, and then we'll get into specific parts of the water column.

Paul in Virginia said, "We often encounter clear and low water during the summer." And that's what you were just describing, it sounds like, and it's not even summer. What tactics do you suggest for targeting smallmouth in such conditions, including leaders, flies, et cetera?

**Jake Villwock:** We could do this entire podcast on that. But I would, uh, I would say that the big thing with low, clear summer water is don't be afraid to go longer and smaller. I've found myself, we battle the same exact stuff as Virginia does in, in the sense of conditions, and there are times in the summertime where I'm running a 16-foot leader to a foam grasshopper or a smaller natural dry fly, just because we have to get the fly on the water quietly. And so the longer leader's gonna hit a little bit softer. The other big thing I do in the summertime when it comes to [00:16:00] low, clear water is I go subsurface a lot. And we're gonna talk about this later as I looked over those questions, but I fish a lot of crayfish, hellgrammites, stone cats, and sculpins, and things like that on a floating line with a full fluoro leader, and that gets me in the water. It allows me to adjust the speed of the presentation with the floating line versus a sinking line or an intermediate line. So I guess the short answer to that is don't be afraid to go longer and smaller.

And just kind of... Well, here, there's a good way to put it. Turn smallmouth bass into spring creek trout when it gets like that. Think about any time you're fishing a spring creek for trout and what you would do in the sense of approach and being quiet and stealthiness and all that stuff, and directly relate that to the smallmouth bass in the summertime, and you'll be very successful.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. Okay, great. We have Mark from Pennsylvania wrote in and he says, "Hey Jake, I just wanted to reach out and say thanks for the book.

It's honestly a [00:17:00] goldmine of information." I guess he's referring to your latest book, Favorite Flies for Smallmouth. "So here's my situation. I don't have a raft just yet, and I'm struggling to find smallies consistently while wading. It feels like every time I hit the water, it's either a total ghost town or I'm standing on top of dozens of them.

Do you have any tips or pointers on how to scout and locate bass specifically when you're on foot?"

**Jake Villwock:** The best thing I would say for that is go find moving water. In the summertime especially, those fish are gonna kind of migrate through the systems, and if it's a, a hot summer, they want the cooler oxygenated water.

And so if you're on foot, try to find sections that have moving water, that have changes in depth. That's another big thing that you wanna look for, too, 'cause those fish are gonna really key in on depth changes. So whether they're ... They can slide into the deep water and they can feed on the bottom, mid-column, and then they can actually slide up onto the flats when [00:18:00] damselflies and stuff are coming off. So somewhere where there's a good transition water and there's good deep water for those fish to hold in. But short answer for that is go find some moving water.

The other thing that's also really kind of important if you're on foot is use what's around you. Like, keep your eyes open and, and look for fish that are on the surface rising to either cicadas or mayflies or damselflies and dragonflies, because those fish are gonna kinda always be there. They might not be the same fish, but when you find feeding fish on top, there's a good chance there's gonna be feeding fish subsurface there all the time. So keep your eyes out for surface activity and look for moving water.

**D. Roger Maves:** This kind of brings up a question. For those that are, you know, maybe fish for trout more than smallmouth, but get to fish for smallmouth once in a while, want to do it more, how do the smallmouth have different holds [00:19:00] and so forth than do trout? Or is it pretty much the same when we're talking about moving water as you just were?

**Jake Villwock:** It's very similar. I tell people all the time that if you're a trout fisherman and you want to get into bass fishing, take whatever you know about trout fishing and go to a bass river or creek, and it's the same thing. Now, smallmouth are gonna have a lot of similar characteristics, not only to just your regular trout, if you will, your 6 to 18-inch fish, but they're also gonna be very similar to larger brown trout, and they're gonna be, you know, they're very structure oriented in that sense. So if you're looking to kind of target bigger fish on foot or in a boat, always be looking for log jams on subsurface structure, whether it be rocks or a sunken tree and things like that. So they're always gonna be looking to be kind of nestled in an ambush areas. I would say they're very, very similar to trout of all sizes.

**D. Roger Maves:** So [00:20:00] they'll be in the seams and so forth too, looking for bugs floating down and just going and taking those, working in and out of the seams and the moving water like a trout-

**Jake Villwock:** Absolutely

**D. Roger Maves:** Would as well. Yeah. Okay.

**Jake Villwock:** Absolutely.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. 'Cause I know a lot of people nymph for smallmouth as well, and they're quite effective with that technique. But we can talk more about that in a few minutes.

**Jake Villwock:** Sure.

**D. Roger Maves:** Let's take a quick break here, Jake, and then we'll come right back and we'll dig more into talking about smallmouth from Topwater to Bottom, and trying to figure out how we can catch these little buggers. So hang tight, we'll be right back.

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You're listening to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio, and we're talking with Jake Villwock about Topwater to Bottom: Cracking the Code on Smallmouth Bass.

If you'd like to ask Jake a question, just go to our homepage, [askaboutflyfishing.com](http://askaboutflyfishing.com), and use that Q&A text box to send us your question. So yeah,

Jake, I always ask my guests at this point in the show, what's going on in your fly fishing world? I know you just got this book published. That's always a great achievement, [laughs] and a lot of work. But yeah, tell us about your business and what's going on.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah, we're kind of firing on all cylinders right now. We're in the heat of not only spring smallmouth season, but also trout season out here in Pennsylvania. So we've got, got guides going all over the place, and it's been pretty awesome, so that's been good.

This year, I guess technically [00:22:00] coming up in February, so next year, I'm hosting a trip to Brazil for peacock bass, so I'm pretty excited about that. So if anybody's listening and they're interested, I still have three spots open for that. So that's gonna be something pretty big for me this year. It'll be my first international hosted trip. I got to go out there last year and check out the lodge, and it was absolutely spectacular, so...

But otherwise, we're just kind of going through the motions right now and hoping that we get this two and a half inches of rain that's coming this weekend, and the creeks blow out for two or three days, and everything kind of resets, because it's getting a little low and clear.

With some of the systems we've been fishing out here, we can't even fish. I haven't been on them in a month because they're too low to float. That's pretty much it, what's going on, just guiding. And I

will say one thing that has changed in the past year or so is that we're now, Relentless Fly Fishing is now guiding...

Well, not guiding. We're managing the guiding for all five of TCO's locations, so we've taken over the second, or the last two of that, [00:23:00] which has been great. And so, you know, State College and all that is now in our repertoire as well. And next year, Relentless turns 10 years old, which is pretty cool, so we started in 2017, and we'll be hopefully doing a, kind of a big party at some point. We want to do a river cleanup next year for our 10-year anniversary and give away some swag and stuff like that. So if you're already following us on social media, great. If not, you know, keep an eye out for Relentless Fly Fishing on Instagram, and we'll have some information about that coming up hopefully by, uh, beginning of next year.

**D. Roger Maves:** And your, um, your URL is [relentlessflyfishing.com](http://relentlessflyfishing.com)? Just to make sure.

**Jake Villwock:** Yes. Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, okay. So people can go there and find out about his guide service and what's going on, and keep track of Jake. And you're on Instagram too as well. Is that-

**Jake Villwock:** Yep, that's, uh, [relentlessflyfishing.com](http://relentlessflyfishing.com). Pretty, pretty simple.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay, okay. Good. Good. Okay, well great. Well, thanks for sharing about what's going on. Sounds like exciting year one way or the other. They always are, right?

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** Um, and yeah, I hope you get [00:24:00] some water too. We- luckily we've had, uh, here in Colorado, we've had rain and snow for the past few days, which is really welcome. Of course, it didn't help with the ski season, but, uh, getting snow in May, uh, it'll help the water, that's for sure.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** Um, so I know where you're at with that.

Well, let's get back to it here. Gary in North Carolina wrote in and said, "I've only fished with a floating line and use split shot to get down to the bottom on streams. Can I use a floating line to fish ponds, lakes, or should I get a sinking line or sink tip?"

**Jake Villwock:** I would stick with a floating line, honestly. They're gonna be easier to feel, easier to feel fish, easier to manage kind of your speed of your, of your retrieve and things like that. And one thing I do a lot, if I need to change my depth or get down deeper, I just change the fly weight itself. So a lot of times when I'm tying flies, I'll tie the same pattern in three different weights, whether it be a lead eyes that are small, medium, and large, so I can...

If I need to get a little deeper, I can [00:25:00] just change the weight of the fly and not worry about fly lines, changing fly lines and all that stuff. So absolutely you can stick with a floating line and kinda keep doing what, what you're already doing.

**D. Roger Maves:** Well, Charlie in Massachusetts, and also Phil wrote in a similar question here online from Kentucky.

He said, "Could you include in your presentation some tips on stillwater fly fishing for smallmouth bass? What are the..." And Phil had added onto that, you know, "What are the differences between smallmouth behavior in lakes versus rivers?"

**Jake Villwock:** Oh, that's a question that I'm not sure I can answer super well, 'cause I don't-

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay

**Jake Villwock:** Do a lot of, I don't do a lot of still water smallmouth fishing personally, but I will say that one of the big things that I have talked to other anglers that do is, as much as you wanna have a sinking line to get down, a lot of times when you're fishing structure, you're kind of vertically jiggling a fly rod almost, and so floating lines are still-

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm

**Jake Villwock:** A [00:26:00] really good idea for that stuff. But similarities, they're gonna be very similar in the sense of movement. They're always gonna be following the bait, and they're always gonna be on structure, but the one thing that, you know, lakes have that we don't have is kind of that thermal change of temperature and oxygen. So, like, you know, depending on where the ideal temperature is for those bass in that lake, you kinda just have to look at the different temperatures and the oxygen levels and kinda see where they're at. So I don't have a lot of information on that, but hopefully that is helpful a little bit.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. Yeah, sure.

All right. Okay, in your book, you organize fly fishing around three feeding zones, topwater, mid-column, and bottom. Why is thinking in zones so important for smallmouth anglers?

**Jake Villwock:** I think one of the things that's super important about it is just, like, knowing where those fish are feeding on any given day. A lot of it relates [00:27:00] directly with water temperature and sunlight, so knowing that, hey, the water today is only gonna be 62 degrees at its peak, those fish aren't gonna be super active on the surface and chasing bait around. They're gonna be kinda sitting on the bottom and just kind of using as little energy as possible and cruising slowly, looking for crayfish. And so when you know you have temperatures that are gonna keep those fish a little bit more lethargic, then you can fish on the bottom. But one of the biggest reasons why I break it down that way is because, and we kinda talked about this a little bit earlier, is it kinda bridging the gap between trout anglers and smallmouth anglers, because they are very similar in the sense of, you know, different feeding columns, and mid-column for trout might be more of an emerger type of deal when you think about that, versus smallmouth, where we're talking about baitfish.

But they do feed in all three different columns, and so it's one of those things that we just kinda like to talk about when it comes to being able to, like I said, bridge the gap between a trout angler and a bass angler.[00:28:00]

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. Yeah. Well, let's start with the topwater zone.

**Jake Villwock:** Okay, let's do it.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. So what creates the perfect topwater smallmouth bite? What are we looking for?

**Jake Villwock:** That's a good question. Water temperature's a big thing. Like right now, I'm just gonna use spring as perfect example for water temperature versus activity for bass, and like one of the big things is bug life. There's gotta be bugs on the surface for those fish to be moving to the surface to feed, so that's one big thing. But the other part is water temperature when it comes to fishing frogs and things like that. Like, we... One very interesting thing about smallmouth bass, when they migrate to spawn, the f- frogs and toads are also spawning at the same exact time. So they are a opportunistic food that those fish can also eat, but you're not gonna see smallmouth chasing frogs around when the water's under 60 degrees. Kinda look for [00:29:00] that like 60-degree water temperature in the spring, and then once you get into that 75 and 80-degree water temperature in the summertime, you're gonna start to see way more bugs on the water, and that's kind of what you're looking for with that. So bugs, bugs is a big part

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. Jason in Kentucky wrote in, he says, "How do you decide which fly to start with? Do you work with the water column in the same way every time or do you vary under certain conditions?"

**Jake Villwock:** It varies in different conditions for sure. I think one of the biggest things is observations, you know, m- paying attention to what's going on. There's plenty of times where I've gone out in the middle of the season with a plan and the first thing I see is super high sun and I can see a bunch of fish on the flats and things like that. And so I know that like if you've got fish cruising in skinny water, they're gonna eat topwater or they're gonna eat crayfish. They're kind of, that's what they're looking for. The main food source in some of those skinnier rocky bottoms is going to be [00:30:00] bugs floating on the surface, bugs falling out of the trees, and then crayfish.

Can I pause real quick and kill this giant spider that's crawling across my floor?

**D. Roger Maves:** Sure

Are you afraid of spiders, Jake?

**Jake Villwock:** No, there's just too many spiders in my house, so I'm trying to eradicate them. Sorry.

**D. Roger Maves:** You gotta get these ... I got these little sticky traps off Amazon-

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah ...

**D. Roger Maves:** That fold up in a tent, you know, and then you can put them under the bed and behind things and stuff. And I catch quite a few with those, so

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah, that was a really big spider, and it should not be at the bottom of my fly tying desk where my bare feet are sitting all the time, so.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, you ha- I think you have more dangerous spiders in the East too than we have out here, so, um-

**Jake Villwock:** We do. We've got a lot, and we've got a bunch that like, aren't like deadly but like will still bite you and [00:31:00] create problems, so I-

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah ...

**Jake Villwock:** if they've got big fang, like those little jumping spiders, the, the little fluffy ones, those are awesome. I won't kill those. But if it's got really long legs and big fangs, I'm killing it.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, I was like, I was trying to explain this to somebody the other day. I said, "You know, at night these darn spiders, they get in your bed and they bite you, you know?" And they said, "No, no, they don't." I said, "The heck they don't."

I said, "What else is biting you in there, right?" That's right. And they sneak around, take a mouthful, and then you wake up in the morning, you got this bite mark. Well, wasn't anything else, had to be a spider, so.

**Jake Villwock:** Oh, yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Even though you don't get sick, they still take a chunk out of you, um-

**Jake Villwock:** Absolutely.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Pretty brave too, to come in there and do that, I think. You know, that's kind of real predator instinct there to take on a human when you're only like the size of a dime.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah, right.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, yeah. Anyway, yeah. Another [00:32:00] question was, what are the biggest mistakes anglers make when, with fishing surface flies for bass?

**Jake Villwock:** A lot of times it's they go too big. That's one of the things that I've noticed a lot with clients that show up with, with rigged up for the day and they bring their own rod and they've got this super sunny out, gin clear water, and they've got a size two popper on, and I'm like, "There's nothing in this river that's gonna eat that right now." So.

I would say size is a big thing, and the other one is your, oh, I'm trying to think of the word, your subtleness of presentation. A lot of times people, again, when they think about bass, they think

about largemouth, and you can throw a beer can out in a pond and they're gonna come up and eat it. But there's a lot of times where smallmouth are just as picky and just as spooky as trout, so you've gotta, you gotta make sure that fly hits the water super soft, quiet.

And the other big thing I see a lot of times, and, and it totally depends, this isn't across the board [00:33:00] by any means, but a lot of people pop their poppers too much. We spend a lot of time dead drifting poppers and not even moving them, just letting them float down the river. And so bass are, you know, there's nothing in nature that goes bloop, bloop, bloop, bloop, bloop all the way across the river, right? So.

The most natural part of any topwater presentation is the actual drop of the fly on the waters. You know, try to make that initial entry into the water as natural as you can.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, I guess you gotta think, you know, what is it you're fishing like. If you're fishing a frog imitation or a, um, a mouse imitation or something, then you would see it moving through the water maybe consistently.

But something like a cricket or a grasshopper or something is gonna fall and then just struggle and then stop, right? And then struggle a little bit and stop, right?

**Jake Villwock:** Yep. [00:34:00] And one thing, too, that's super interesting, most of the bigger bugs, cicadas, grasshoppers, moths, you know, those bigger bugs, once they're on the water, they can't get back off the water.

They're not gonna be jumping up and down trying to get out. They're just gonna be, like you said, creating a disturbance and a vibration. And so being able to fish a popper with more of, like, a vibration presentation or just kind of like what I do a lot of times is just tell my clients to lift their thumb, like two to three inches, and it just barely moves the popper and creates that kind of ripple on the water, and then it sits there, and, you know, making sure that you're not, like I said, not overfishing something.

Now, like right now with frogs, it's a little different now. The water's super low, but, like, last week and the week before when we had some, when we had water, you could throw that thing and hit the water at mach seven, and the first pull of [00:35:00] that frog, something's on top of it jumping completely out of the water. You know, they were super aggressive. But now with the water being 200, 300 CFS less, it's more of a subtle presentation where you're kinda throwing that frog in, trying to drop it just like it fell out of a, barely fell out of the bushes, and then you're just kinda pulling it, and you're not creating those really long, large pops.

And so that's one thing that's super interesting. The other thing, side note to that, is a lot of times the reaction to your popper frog or other dry fly is gonna be very similar to how you're presenting it. If you're aggressively popping a frog, you're gonna probably have a pretty aggressive take, but- if you're just kind of pulling it across the surface, you're gonna have a lot more subtle takes.

I mean, today we had probably a dozen eats that we were like, "Where'd the frog go?" There was absolutely zero [00:36:00] disturbance on the water, and the frog just disappeared, and they weren't even, they didn't even break the surface, which is crazy. And then we had some that came completely out of the water and ate it when they were going back in.

But also, that side note is pay attention to how you're presenting it because that's how fast the fish is gonna eat it, and then you also have to directly correlate the speed of the eat to the set rate or set speed that you're gonna do when the fish eats it.

**D. Roger Maves:** Do you fish mice much topwater?

**Jake Villwock:** Um, yes.

**D. Roger Maves:** For smallmouth?

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah, this time of year and occasionally in the summertime when we've got higher flows. I don't know what it is about mice, but it doesn't matter if it's 110 degrees outside and pure sun, smallmouth absolutely lose their mind for mice

**D. Roger Maves:** Hmm, okay. Um-

**Jake Villwock:** It's kind of interesting. The first mouse fish I ever caught was we were fishing probably, like, a three-inch mouse and a six-inch smallmouth ate it. They don't care.

**D. Roger Maves:** Huh. [00:37:00] Yeah, I mean, I, I've been down the lake by my house here. I've been fishing, um, small mice patterns and, like you say, it doesn't matter what's... Nothing can be happening on the lake, or there can be a hatch on, but I don't think I've ever been down there when I haven't got a hit. Doesn't mean I caught the fish, but I, I always get a hit, and that's kinda what, what I'm bringing up here is, is there something about the way that...

I would think a frog would be similar, in the way that they take it, that, I mean, I tend to probably lose more because I don't get the hook in them, and I'm wondering if that's a, a problem with just the way my mouse is tied, my reaction, and whether that correlates to frogs as well.

**Jake Villwock:** So it could be a few different things, and I've noticed this with different frogs, frog patterns, especially the Whitlock Swimming Frog from Umpqua has a very narrow head, so it's not super tall.

It gets in a [00:38:00] fish's mouth so much easier than some of my buddies that tie Shadowbox style deer hair frogs that are, like, super tall heads and, like, I definitely lose way more fish on those because they're just not... I shouldn't say lose. I miss way more fish because they're not getting it in their mouth.

They're kind of, they're trying, but they're not. And I would also say that, like, even a mouse or a frog, go back to what I just said about the eat speed, right? If it's a fast eat, you gotta be fast on the set because they're gonna eat it and spit it before you know what's going on. But if it's a more confident eat where they just kinda come up and suck it down, you really wanna make sure that that fish's head is back underwater before you set the hook because you will pull it straight out of the mouth, and we had that happen today.

My angler went 0 for 10 on frogs.

**D. Roger Maves:** Hmm.

**Jake Villwock:** And he was doing phenomenal all morning, and something happened where, like, his timing was just off and, you [00:39:00] know, I don't know if it was 'cause they were kinda eating downstream, and he had, like, a, a slight downstream belly 'cause we were in the fast water fishing the s- the slow edges, and those fish were eating it going downstream. And his reaction to what they were doing was amplified because he had extra tension on it from the downstream belly, and he might've just been pulling it out of the mouth.

Sometimes it's the size of the fly. Other times, it's just not waiting long enough for those fish to actually get it in their mouth.

**D. Roger Maves:** Are they taking it headfirst, both frogs and mice?

**Jake Villwock:** Honestly, it's probably 50/50.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay.

**Jake Villwock:** You know, I have ... I mean, sometimes it's just the way the hook ends up in there, but, like, I've had so many times where they eat it from behind, and you, like, pull 'em in and it's, like, stuck to the roof of their mouth, and this little frog fly is, like, staring at you as you tre- you know, open their mouth to get it out, which is kind of funny.

But there are ... I would think that a lot of times when you hook them inside the mouth, they're eating it from [00:40:00] behind, and a lot of times when you hook 'em, like, on the outside of the lip or, you know, just on the lip, they're eating it from the head. So it just depends.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. Okay. Yeah, good information. Good information.

And by the way, Dan in Illinois just wrote in online. He says, "Great podcast on smallmouth fishing. I've learned a great deal already." So

**Jake Villwock:** Well, thank you.

**D. Roger Maves:** We must ... Yeah, you must be doing something right here.

**Jake Villwock:** Well-

**D. Roger Maves:** And thanks for the compliment there, Dan. We appreciate that. Getting a little, uh, feedback about that is always helpful.

Uh, let's take a quick break here, Jake, and, uh, come back, and then we'll dig a little bit more into topwater, then move on to mid-column here. So, uh, hang tight everybody, we'll be right back.

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If you'd like to ask Jake a question, just go to our homepage at [askaboutflyfishing.com](http://askaboutflyfishing.com) and use that Q&A text box to send it in. [00:42:00]

This one involves topwater too. Phil in Kentucky wrote, and he says, "I've experienced smallmouth with lockjaw during huge hatches of *Hexagenia* mayflies in northern Minnesota."

He says, "Matching the hatch has failed. Throwing a fly that stands out in a crowd has failed. What are some ideas for catching smallmouth in such circumstances?"

**Jake Villwock:** Go subsurface.

**D. Roger Maves:** To hell with the topwater.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah. You know, a lot of times when there's that many bugs on the water, those fish can 100% get full.

That's something I've seen, you know, not just with smallmouth, but also with trout out west. The whole salmon fly hatch is awesome, but they, all they gotta do is eat four of them and they're full. But I've seen it so many times with bass, and I've seen it with trout as well, is like in certain hatches, they're just, they might not be lockjaw, they just might not be eating the topwater version of that bug. So, [00:43:00]

Go subsurface or try a dry dropper and run a hex nymph about a foot underneath of the actual hex dry fly. That's something that we do a lot in the summertime when those fish get super picky, and it's quite amazing how many fish you'll catch on that nymph that's just a foot underneath of a popper or something like that.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, I remember doing that down in the San Juan River, same kind of thing. I wasn't getting any hits on topwater, and I tied a dropper off my dry, and bam, I started catching fish. Yeah, it's really amazing how well that works at times. Yeah.

**Jake Villwock:** Absolutely.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, cool. Yeah, well, thanks Phil for that question, and let's see here. Yeah, your book mentions how modern topwater flies have evolved from bulky deerhair bugs to more refined foam and articulated patterns.

What drove that evolution?

**Jake Villwock:** I think the biggest thing that, that drove that evolution is angling pressure, to be totally honest with you. [00:44:00] The more anglers we have on the water, the pickier those fish get, the more aware of what's going on they get, and it's one of those things where that question actually hits home for me a lot because when I first started fishing some of our bigger rivers in the summertime, all we did was fish deerhair frogs all season long, and now you can't even be caught dead with a frog in your boat in the summertime.

They're not gonna eat them. They're too aware of their surroundings. And something that's super interesting about smallmouth that, a lot of people probably know, but some people don't, is that they're very slow-growing fish. You know, an 18-inch smallmouth could be 15 to 18 years old, so they've seen it all, and they just, they become aware of what's going on. So I think angling pressure and, in all honesty, the last eight years, we've had low waters become our norm for summertime. And so where we might have had 2,500 CFS summer flow [00:45:00] as our standard, now we're having stuff in the thousands. And so when you cut the water density in half, you're gonna also have those fish way more spooky 'cause they use the depth of water as cover sometimes. And so you have less water, you have less cover, and you become very spooky, and they won't react to those bigger bugs.

**D. Roger Maves:** Here's an interesting question. Will in Georgia, he says, "What about a dropper off a popper suspended 18 to 24 inches? What depth of water would that be successful, or would it be successful?"

Kind of what we were just talking about, huh?

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's all the time. When we get those fish that are being super picky on poppers and other foam bugs, like, I would say 18 inches is probably the furthest down that I go, unless you're in four or five or six foot water. But like, a foot to 18 inches is probably all you need because those fish are, you know, even though they're not necessarily on [00:46:00] the surface, they're kind of always looking around, and so, like, they're looking up, they're looking down, they're looking to their sides.

And so, you know, they see something that's not super intrusive that's just kind of floating mid-column, there's a really good chance those fish are gonna go up and look at them. I say that a dry dropper, popper dropper, whatever you wanna call it, like, is super successful. Obviously, if you're only in a foot of water, you don't wanna have that deep because you're gonna end up dragging that thing against the water. But as long as you have the same two extra inches of depth compared to what your dropper is, you can fish it in any of that water.

It doesn't matter the depth so much, but I would stay no more than 18 inches below that popper.

**D. Roger Maves:** And what kind of fly would you drop off that popper?

**Jake Villwock:** Some sort of like, like a leech pattern.

I tie some unweighted crayfish, like the old clouser crayfish. That's a great dropper fly. Girdle bugs, the [00:47:00] type of-

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah ...

**Jake Villwock:** You know, some sort of like stone fly nymph or bigger bug. 'Cause like if you think about smallmouth, most of the systems that they're in, they've got dragonflies, they've got stoneflies, they've got hexes.

They've got some pretty big nymphs that they could eat, so don't be afraid to run the biggest nymph that you got underneath of there, or a smaller crayfish.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, it's, um, the girdle bug or what Pat's rubber legs they're called too, I guess.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** When my son and I were down in Chile, first day we went out, we were out on Big Lake fishing some edges of these reed beds, and they had us rigged up with, uh, like a Chernobyl attractor pattern on top, and then a dropper of, of that girdle bug or Pat's rubber legs. And we go-

**Jake Villwock:** Mm-hmm ...

**D. Roger Maves:** "oh, this is interesting. Never fished this before." And we would just slowly retrieve it in and sure enough, man, we got... Well, we got hit on both. I mean, they would hit both, but just the method of [00:48:00] fishing was kind of unusual with a big old Pat's rubber legs underneath there. And then we were on the small lake, and I was throwing streamers, and I was, kind of hit a dry spell there, and he says, "Here, I want you to try something different."

And I said, "What?" And he says, "Here, put this, uh..." And he put on this, again, the girdle bug or Pat's rubber legs, and he says, "Start stripping this." I said, "Really? Strip that?" He goes, "Yeah, just throw it like a streamer and start stripping." Sure enough, man, within about five minutes I had a fish on. And I'd never stripped a, a fly like that before. But-

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah ...

**D. Roger Maves:** Maybe that might work for smallmouth as well. I don't know.

**Jake Villwock:** Absolutely. I mean, there's, you know, hellgrammites and there's a lot of those nymphs are swimming nymphs or, you know, burrowers and things like that. And so they have the ability to move, and so those, it's not an unnatural presentation to have those things move.

I mean, I swing hellgrammites through riffles all the time and just crush fish. [00:49:00] And so you're not doing something unnatural, I guess, is what I'm trying to say.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Jake Villwock:** I already said it, but I'll say it again.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. Okay, good. Last question for topwater zone. For anglers new to bass on the fly, what were the top three surface flies that they should always carry?

**Jake Villwock:** Uh, they should always carry the old Mister Wiggly, which is a foam rubber leg hopper style deal that the guys at Tight Lines out in Wisconsin came up with. It's probably one of the most-Well, that is the most effective topwater foam bug out there. A Boogle Bug or some sort of size four popper, you don't wanna be super big on that, in different colors, chartreuse, yellow, white, black, and then some sort of damselfly nymph, or damselfly.

**D. Roger Maves:** Adult, yeah?

**Jake Villwock:** You know, there's multiple... Yeah, an adult. Something super interesting about damselflies that I wanna just spin off on real quick is that damselflies never touch the water. Their feet are too small to hold up their [00:50:00] body weight, so smallmouth have to commit to eat those things as they're flying by.

So if you are ever fishing topwater and you're starting to get a lot of, you're fishing poppers or grasshoppers, and you're starting to get a lot of fish that are kinda looking at your fly but not actually eating it, downsize it to something small and blue, and I bet you'll see a drastic change in the reaction, the speed of the fish to the fly.

**D. Roger Maves:** Hmm. Okay. Good. All right. Mid-column zone. Explain, when we're talking mid-column, what a swim fly really is and why this style's become so effective?

**Jake Villwock:** A swim fly is basically an unweighted or a lightly weighted bait fish pattern, and the reason why they've become so popular is because you can fish them...

Well, first of all, smallmouth are always gonna eat a [00:51:00] minnow. Nope, that's not true. Well, yeah, that's true. They'll always, they'll always eat a minnow. However, in the middle of the summertime when there's so much food, whether it be on the bottom or on the top, smallmouth don't have to chase. They don't have to exert a lot of energy to feed. So you can still fish a streamer in the summertime, but the size of fish you're gonna catch is gonna drastically fall.

Those small, motivated 6 to 12 inchers are gonna eat them, but the bigger fish aren't gonna chase that. So that was a side note to what-

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm ...

**Jake Villwock:** that question. But I think one of the biggest things that made them so popular is that when you're fishing a swim fly, most of the time you're fishing it on an intermediate line, and so

while it's not so much a topwater surface eat, it is still a very visual eat because you can see them, and then when you get in the seasons like the springtime, there's not a lot of bug life yet.

There are some hellgrammites around, [00:52:00] there are some crayfish around in the spring, but the primary food source in the spring is baitfish, and so, you know, those fish get super aggressive on those baitfish patterns. I will say that primarily the only time I have swim flies in my box is the spring and the fall, when they're really keyed in on baitfish and there's not a lot of other stuff around.

But in the summertime I've got, you know, a few smaller baitfish patterns, but primarily my summertime box is topwater and stuff on the bottoms, crayfish, hellgrammites, and things like that.

**D. Roger Maves:** How did articulated flies and designs like blaine Chuchlet's Game Changer change smallmouth fly fishing?

**Jake Villwock:** Uh, it created way more movement in the flies.

And one of the biggest things for smallmouth, even when they're super aggressive, smallmouth love the pause, right? So they like, you know, the strip and then that fly just sitting there, and the [00:53:00] articulations in a game changer and other flies that have one or two hooks or, or... Sorry. They have two hooks and two or three articulations.

Those flies are gonna still move when they're not moving, when you're not moving. So you wanna make sure that, well, you know, you don't want to make sure the game changers and other articulate flies create that movement while you're not doing anything, so they're still moving on the pause, and I think that's what has created that game changer for smallmouth, is the fact that those flies move when they're not being moved, and that is something that drives smallmouth nuts.

**D. Roger Maves:** And that has to do with being neutrally buoyant as well? In other words-

**Jake Villwock:** Yep ...

**D. Roger Maves:** Not necessarily falling in the column or rising the column, but, you know.

**Jake Villwock:** Exactly. Yeah. Neutrally buoyant is huge because in the conventional world, there's, you've got your rubber flukes, and you've got your, there's a technique that a lot of people [00:54:00] do, like a suspended jerk bait, and that jerk bait that's suspended doesn't...

It sits in the same exact plane the entire presentation. So when you jerk that spinning rod and that thing goes crazy, it doesn't rise or fall. It stays in that same column, and then when it stops, it just kinda hovers in that area, and I think that's one of the big things too, is like when you're fishing a streamer, there's plenty of time, or a swim fly, I should say, there's plenty of times where you're only fishing it in a foot to two feet of water.

And so if you have something that's got weight on it, it's gonna immediately fall to the bottom. And a lot of times you want to be able to- present your fly in direct correlation to the fish's reaction to the fly, not the sink rate of the fly or the fly line. So you wanna be able to have that fly... That's one of the reasons why I only fish an intermediate with almost every one of my sub-service streamers,

because I wanna make sure that [00:55:00] I can directly relate the presentation speed to the speed of the fish coming behind it or the interest of that fish, 'cause there's plenty of times where you've got a fish following it and you pause it and it gets a little close, and then you strip it once and it shoots over and looks at it again.

And then you pause it, and if that thing starts to fall out of the way or you've gotta keep it moving faster because it's gonna hit the bottom, that fish is never gonna get caught. But if you can play that cat and mouse game with that fish, there's a really good chance that eventually that fish is gonna eat your fly.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah. How important are fly materials today compared to 20 years ago? And maybe you can talk about the kinds of materials and the changes that have taken place.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah, I mean, synthetics have become a huge thing. The positive side or the advantage to synthetics is a lot of times they're more durable than natural hair like bucktail and rabbit and things like that.

They just, they're more [00:56:00] durable, and so you can tie a fly that might take a little bit longer that's gonna give you that movement, and it's gonna still be fishable after a day of total insanity or a month of fishing, it's still gonna be good. I think one of the biggest things that has changed fly tying has been the introduction to, of brushes.

Not necessarily what the different types of brushes, but just brushes in general because now you can... You know, there was a lot of times back in the day all your streamers were in a two-dimensional plane. They were super thin. They might be tall, but there was no, like, roundness to a lot of the streamers.

It was just bucktail off the top-

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm ...

**Jake Villwock:** bucktail off the bottom or feather, you know, feathers off the top. With the introduction to, or of brushes, you now have the ability to make more of a carrot shape. Blaine Chappell talks about that a lot with the game changers, like you now have a three-dimensional fly, and so that [00:57:00] water can now hit four different sides of that fly and move it any direction versus just kind of that up and down motion. Now you've got that glide side to side, which is huge. You know, and different flashing materials, now you've got those kind of ribbons of flash where you can, instead of just having old Flashabou and KrystalFlash that you threw on the outside of the fly, now you can create this, like, internal flash, you know, almost this, like, nuke egg. I think Tommy Lynch said this, like a nuke egg effect to a streamer where, like, you create that dimension of almost a soft plastic where the flash is infused in that rubber. You can now do that with a fly, which is really, really cool.

You know, bucktail will forever be a very popular material. I mean, me personally, I learned how to tie streamers with bucktail being a saltwater guy. Like, it's one of those materials that I'm very comfortable with, but the ability to tie a fully synthetic fly or, you know, one that's got a bunch of

different, [00:58:00] you know, brushes and things like that, it just makes the fly so much more durable, and I think that's, that's the short answer to that long-winded answer.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah, I know, um-

**Jake Villwock:** It's just, they're just more durable ...

**D. Roger Maves:** I'm familiar with Enrico Puglisi's brushes. He's got a ton of them.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** A lot used for saltwater, yeah. Yeah, interesting, interesting synthetic material for sure.

Many anglers fish streamers too fast or too slow. What clues tell you you've found the right retrieve speed?

**Jake Villwock:** It's a fish eating-

**D. Roger Maves:** I mean, other than the bite. Yeah. So how, how do you play with that? I mean, do you ...

**Jake Villwock:** that is a great question. A lot of times it depends on the attitude of the fish. Like, when it comes to smallmouth, smallmouth are a, a prowler. They're not like a false albacore or a striper where, like, they're moving all the time, they're chasing their bait super fast because a lot of times their bait is super fast. Sometimes [00:59:00] it's a attitude itself of the fish. So, like, smallmouth, like you said, they're not designed to swim fast for long distances. They're designed to close a short gap really quickly, right? So you don't want to, and I kinda hit on it a little bit earlier about, like, summertime, like, those fish don't have to chase, so they're not going to.

And so the reaction to the fly, if you can see your fly and you can see the fish, that's obviously the great way to tell what's going on. I mean, I see, like, in our springtime, a lot of times our water is that kind of big fish green color, so it's not super clear, but it's clear enough that you can see a fish behind it.

And, like, if you start to see a lot of fish coming after your fly and then peeling off and just getting less interested, you're probably fishing it too fast. So you need to slow it down, get that fish's attention a little bit more, and just kinda keep it in their zone.

Um, and so the direct reaction to the [01:00:00] fish is the most important part, but then also just knowing what the forage food is also doing, right? So I mean, you talk about mid-column streamers, yeah, a lot of times you're imitating shiners, dace, and things like that that are kind of always moving, but there's also a level of streamer fishing when it comes to fishing sub-service and, or the bottom. And there's so many of their foragers, there is so much of their forage food out there that has this kind of like, "Wait, wait, wait.

Oh man, I'm in trouble," and go. Like, I've got all these pictures of the crayfish and darters and sculpins and, you know, stone cats and, like, I'm six foot tall and I can get within five inches of these things and take a picture with my iPhone. How close can a smallmouth get to that thing before it real- realizes it's in trouble? So, like, you know, knowing what the prey does and the actual kind of characteristics of that fish are, are huge when it comes to that. So when it comes to [01:01:00] smallmouth, I don't think you can ever go too slow. So if you start to s- you know, if you're not having a super successful day burning streamers or you feel like maybe you're going too fast, slow it down 'cause you cannot go too slow.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. One last question about for the, for the, uh, mid column. Any flies you'd suggest as go-to flies? For smallmouth?

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah. I mean, I'll give myself a shameless plug. The, my signature fly, the Roamer, is a great fly, single hook or the double or triple articulated one, super easy to cast, has a lot of movement.

You can tie it in so many different color combos that you can fish it in every condition out there. You can tie them in black and purple, all white, chartreuse, all that stuff. The Feather Game Changer, Blaine's Feather Game Changer, is one of my favorites. I absolutely love that one. And then you've got stuff like the Circus Peanut, which is kind of a hybrid. It's, it's a bottom-dwelling, you know, one you can fish on the bottom, but it's [01:02:00] also a swim fly as well, so Circus Peanut's really good. Mike Schultz's Swingin' D is also another really good one. It's a little bit big for where we're at, but those guys crush with it out there.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, and your book, to give your book a plug here, isn't just all your flies, right? I mean, you've-

**Jake Villwock:** No ...

**D. Roger Maves:** Made a collection of some of the great smallmouth fishers and included those flies in there. Do you wanna talk about how that book was put together a little bit? Just...

**Jake Villwock:** Sure, yeah. It's part of a series from Stackpole, so they've got favorite flies of different locations. Like-

**D. Roger Maves:** Right ...

**Jake Villwock:** you know, there's a Pennsylvania one. I think there's a Colorado one now.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm. Vermont.

**Jake Villwock:** Another of Cap... Yeah, there's different ones. So they wanted to do a smallmouth one-

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm ...

**Jake Villwock:** and I kinda volunteered that I would do it, because when I finished my first book, there were so many things that came out while I was writing it or right after it came out. And I was like, "Man, there's so many really good flies out there." And, and there's, you know, I just really wanted to kinda [01:03:00] feature what I considered the top 50 flies for smallmouth, and I've got some great tyers. Like, I have a bunch of Blaine stuff in there. I've got some, you know, obviously Schultz stuff, but I've got some Virginia stuff. I've got some Wisconsin stuff, some Vermont stuff, and so it, they're not just Pennsylvania-based. It's all over wherever smallmouth swims. It was a fun book to write, for sure, and, you know, getting to talk to some of those tyers again and also meet some new ones was really cool.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. Great book. Great book. Well, good job.

**Jake Villwock:** Oh, I'm gonna-

**D. Roger Maves:** All right, well, that-

**Jake Villwock:** Can I mention-

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah ...

**Jake Villwock:** one more streamer? Brendan Ruch's Nut Job, that's a fly that's recently kinda taken the industry by storm, and it's a relatively, I wouldn't say it's an easy fly to tie, but it's a pretty straightforward fly to tie that has a lot of movements. That's another great fly for the mid column.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. On to the bottom zone. So is this true that many, the, of the big [01:04:00] smallmouth spend their time feeding near the bottom, or is that, uh, not true? Well- I mean, if you're looking for the big ones, is that where you go?

**Jake Villwock:** Yes. You go to the bottom. You go to the bottom or the top, and that's- That's a seasonal thing.

This time of year in the spring, they're topping, they're all columns. We fish, if I can fish streamers, you know, if I can fish swim flies, I will, but when we get to that time of the year where the water's right and the fish are out looking up, like I've been fishing frogs primarily, almost exclusively for three weeks, which has been awesome.

But in the summertime, absolutely, and I mentioned it a couple times, they don't have... There's so much food that those big fish know they don't have to exert a lot of energy, and so they're just gonna cruise or sit stationary in skinny water and wait for stuff to float over their heads. Yeah, you either wanna be on the bottom or on the top for those big fish, and basically don't move your fly at all.[01:05:00]

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. Crayfish patterns are a big focus of your book. Why are they so important?

**Jake Villwock:** Oh, well, that's a great question because there's a zillion of them, and it is a very common food source for smallmouth. They've done a couple diet studies, and they have found that

in August, in September, and part of October, and I'm-- this-- I might be among my botches, but I'm just gonna go with it.

They said that 80% of a smallmouth's diet is crayfish, and one of the reasons for that is that it-- crayfish mate in the fall, and then in the springtime, the females lay their eggs. And by the time it is August and September, when you start to see a lot of those bugs kinda disappear, you don't have a lot of damselflies left, there's no more mayflies, those crayfish that hatched in the spring are now between three-quarters of an [01:06:00] inch and an inch, and they're all soft-shelled.

So they're a easy meal for smallmouth to eat. Crayfish are also one of those fight or flight bugs, or not bugs, creatures that will literally stand off to a smallmouth, so smallmouth can get super close to 'em and then just open their mouths, flare their gills, and suck 'em in. It's huge. The other thing that's big is crayfish will also, just like sculpins, will actually eat smallmouth eggs. So in the springtime, smallmouth know that if they see a crayfish, that they gotta eat it because it's gonna eat their eggs.

**D. Roger Maves:** Hmm. Interesting. Yeah. How do you fish them effectively on the bottom? What kind of retrieve imitates natural movement for crayfish?

**Jake Villwock:** That's a great question, and I will try really hard not to speak for the next 20 minutes about it, but-

because I have personally become super obsessed with crayfish in the last few years, I personally fish them [01:07:00] 100% on a floating line with a thinner fluorocarbon leaders. I build my own leaders for them, and I start my butt section at 20 pounds, and I taper down to 10 or eight or 10 pounds, and the reason I do that is because if you fish it on a fast-sinking line or an intermediate line, it is impossible to mend it, and so you end up fishing that crayfish way too fast.

I've watched a lot of really good spin anglers fishing tube jigs and other kind of jig-style lures, and what makes them super effective is that they're fishing eight-pound, six or eight-pound fluorocarbon- And there's virtually nothing for that water to grab onto, so there's no surface area. So they can slow that presentation down to a true crawl.

And so one of the reasons why it's so effective is it just stays in [01:08:00] the zone longer. And so I was like, "Okay, how do we fish a crayfish slow without getting it stuck on the bottom so much?" You know, I used to fish large, extra large lead eyes because I'm like, "Got to get that crayfish down. It's got to stay down."

But in reality, the lighter your crayfish is and the longer it takes to get to the bottom, the less you're gonna get stuck and the more natural movement you're gonna have because crayfish flutter. When they get spooked, they shoot up in the water column, and then they come back down. And so you kind of have that, like, that kind of like rainbow effect where it's like they start on the bottom, they go to the top, and they come back down in kind of like a U shape. And so when you're fishing a floating line, you can mend your line to not only slow down your presentation, but every time you mend it, that crayfish pops up off the bottom and just kind of falls back slowly. And so what I do is I tie almost every single one of my [01:09:00] crayfish with a tungsten bead because tungsten is super dense, and so you can really feel that thing hit on the bottom.

And then you see it a lot on a lot of Blaine Chocolates Change across, but he puts foam on the rabbit strip for the claws. I actually put it on the hook itself, and the reason I do it is because it counterbalances the sink rate of the tungsten, and it keeps that hook slightly elevated. So every time you mend it, you're gonna get that kind of...

The tungsten bead's gonna come up in the water column, and then it's immediately gonna flip over, and it's gonna flutter back down, and that hook kind of stays out of the rocks at all times. And so, you know, fishing them super slow is really important, but also go lighter than you think you do. I don't have a single crayfish in my box right now that has anything larger than a small lead eye on it or a six-millimeter tungsten bead.

So that's not super [01:10:00] heavy. Another reason why I do that is because The fall, as soon as that crayfish hits the water and starts to go down, you're fishing it. So it's not like it has to be on the bottom to fish it. And one thing that I've noticed too, like with my dad used to be a tournament bass guide, and one of his favorite lures was an unweighted Senko worm because they, the worm itself has some weight, but it falls so slow that he would catch 50% of his fish probably before that worm even hit the bottom because those fish can see it coming down, and they're, it catches their attention.

Where if you have an extra large or a large lead eye, that thing's gonna straight to the bottom, and the fish is gonna be like, "What was that?" And then you're stuck on the bottom. Versus a lighter crayfish, you're fishing it before it even hits the bottom, and you're gonna get fish to eat that thing before it even gets close to the bottom.

So go lighter, stay floating line, and run a thinner fluorocarbon leader because that's gonna give you the ability to [01:11:00] slow that presentation down.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mike, I think those are great tips. There's a lot to think about there, and put together.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** Uh-huh, and make it work. Yeah. Mike in Canada wrote in and he says, he asked if you'd use a lot of crayfish patterns.

We don't... You've already answered that. 80% what they're eating is, is crayfish or something. But he says, "What about sculpin patterns?" So that other 20%, would you use something like a sculpin, or are there other bottom patterns that you would use?

**Jake Villwock:** Absolutely use a sculpin. One of the things that's super interesting about sculpin is sculpins are a cold water baitfish, and so you're not gonna find them in a lot of your smallmouth rivers, because they get too hot for sculpins to survive.

However, we have a lot of little catfish, so we have stone cats, mad toms, and baby catfish, and they have the same exact profile as a sculpin. So you can 100% still [01:12:00] fish a lot of sculpins. I fish a lot of hellgrammites. I fish a lot of stone cat imitations, and so, and a lot of leech patterns, a lot of, like, just kind of a, honestly just a rabbit strip on a hook s- is great.

There is so much food on the bottoms of most of these smallmouth rivers that if you flip a couple rocks over, you can immediately see what's underneath of there and imitate that stuff. So absolutely, and I will also say that I never fish a heavy sinking line for any of that stuff, and I mentioned that before. You can't feel it.

**D. Roger Maves:** Right.

**Jake Villwock:** And, you know, when you fish a fast sinking line, you end up with this kind of, like, J or an L shape, and so it's dragging along the bottom, and there's so much slack between the tip of your fly rod and that fly that you're never gonna feel those fish eats. Intermediate line if you have to fish a sinking line, but I would prefer and I would highly recommend to everybody to just stick with a floating line. [01:13:00]

**D. Roger Maves:** There you go, Mike, all the answers you need. Go out and do it.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** Well, one last question. Where do you see smallmouth fly design and tactics heading over the next decade or so? Do you see a lot of change, or what we have is good and just work it? What are your thoughts?

**Jake Villwock:** Oh, I think there's always gonna be change. I mean, it, it's so hard when you go back to the days of, like, Bob Clouser and the Clouser Minnow and Lefty and the, and the Deceiver, and Chuck Craft with some of his stuff. Like, you look at those flies and, like, that day and age, those were groundbreaking, innovative flies, and now you have, you know, the game changer platform, and that's not just for swim flies. I mean, he's got crayfish, he's got dragonflies, he's got nymphs, and he's got everything. And so it's gonna be really hard to find something more innovative than that, but there's always gonna be innovation. But I just think [01:14:00] that I can't tell you what it's gonna be because sometimes I don't even know what I'm doing. I just am, like, sitting there trying to figure out... Like, with the crayfish was a perfect example of, like, how do I solve this problem of being able to fish longer, slower, and, you know, more effectively? And my crayfish design that I have that's also in the book, it's called the Craw Daddy, that entire design was to solve that problem.

And so, like, it just depends on how popular the fishing gets, how much more spooky they get, and that will drive innovation. But as of right now, I mean, I'll say yes, it's gonna happen, but, like, I can't even fathom what it's gonna be because it's-

**D. Roger Maves:** Right ...

**Jake Villwock:** So good right now.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, that's kinda like- AI in the tech world, it's like, wow, this is really incredible, but where are we gonna be in even five years? Who knows?

**Jake Villwock:** Right.

**D. Roger Maves:** You know?

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** You can't predict.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah, exactly.

**D. Roger Maves:** I remember I read something a long time ago and it said something like, "Don't even try..." And this, it didn't matter where in time you were. [01:15:00] "Don't even try to predict 50 years from now what life will be like on the planet."

**Jake Villwock:** Yes.

**D. Roger Maves:** There's no way we can.

I mean, there... And I think we've seen that in the past, at least I have in my lifetime, changed so dramatically that who would-- you would've never thought we'd be where we are today. So who knows where we'll be in the fishing world or in the technical world years from now, so.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** Well, yeah, this has been great, Jake. Really good. Really good show tonight. But we gotta wrap it up here and call it a night, and, uh, I know it's late out there on the East Coast, so let's do that. But stick with me till the end here. We're gonna be giving away your book, Favorite Flies for Smallmouth Bass, and courtesy of Stackpole Books. And we're also gonna be giving away a one-year membership to Fly Fishers International and a one-year membership to Trout Unlimited.

So hang tight. We'll do just that, and then we'll call it a night. So I'll be right back to give away [01:16:00] those prizes in just a few seconds.

The Bonefish and Tarpon Trust works very hard to safeguard the future of our beloved flats fisheries and protecting spawning sites, like threatened by unsustainable fishing pressure to securing historic funding to Florida's Everglades and estuaries.

Thanks to their members, they've expanded their conservation to the Bahamas, Belize, and Mexico. There's still much more work to be done, and they need your help. With your support, they can ensure that the flats fishery is healthy and sustainable now and for generations to come. Visit [btt.org](http://btt.org) and become a member of the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust today. Again, that's [btt.org](http://btt.org).

So just a quick reminder to everyone, before you leave the website tonight, please take a minute and give us your feedback about the show. You can find a link on our homepage in the section under tonight's show that says, "What did you think of the show?" Just click on that link and leave your comments. We'd really appreciate it.

Well, now it's time to give away our prizes. Our winners for our [01:17:00] drawings are randomly selected from the show's registration database. If you didn't register for tonight's show, it's too late now, but make sure you do so for our next show so you don't miss out on a chance to win one of these great prizes.

If you are one of the lucky winners, we'll contact you after the show to collect your information so that we can deliver your prize to you.

So first, we'll be giving away a one-year membership to Fly Fishers International, and to learn more about FFI, go to [flyfishersinternational.org](http://flyfishersinternational.org), [flyfishersinternational.org](http://flyfishersinternational.org).

And our winner for that is Dave Maynard in South Dakota. So congratulations, Dave, and I know you'll enjoy your membership to Fly Fishers International.

And now we'll give away a one-year membership to Trout Unlimited. And to learn more about Trout Unlimited, go to [tu.org](http://tu.org), [tu.org](http://tu.org). And our winner for that is, hold on, is Kip [01:18:00] Innies, Kip Innies in Missouri. So congratulations, Kip. I know you'll enjoy your membership to Trout Unlimited as well.

And now we'll give away a copy of Jake's latest book, Favorite Flies for Smallmouth Bass, courtesy of Stackpole Books. And so the way we play this game is I'm gonna ask a question, and you get to type the answer in, in that form on our homepage, along with your name and your location and email address there.

And whoever sends in the correct answer first will win Jake's book, Favorite Flies for Smallmouth Bass. So Earlier in the show, we were talking about, because this is something they're experiencing right now in Jake's area and experiences in the Southwest too, we were talking about encountering clear and low water during the summer.

What did Jake suggest? There was [01:19:00] two things he suggested for clear low water during the summer. What did he suggest you do to get more productive fishing going on in those conditions?

I hope this one is, uh, not too difficult, but I think it was-- your answers, Jake, were good tips to, for people to remember in all kinds of fishing situations.

So let's see. We have a-- There's a slight delay before people hear it, and then of course they gotta type.

Okay. One that's, um... I asked for two things. I got one answer here, which was fishing deep, and I think what you had said, Jake, was subsurface, right?

**Jake Villwock:** Yep.

**D. Roger Maves:** And here I got another one, longer and smaller in terms of leaders.

And that was a complete-- both of these are complete answers. [01:20:00] Long leaders and soft present. What do you think about these answers here ? Jake, do you hear one that, uh, strikes your-

**Jake Villwock:** I, I-

**D. Roger Maves:** They're all kinda in the, in the area there ...

**Jake Villwock:** I think the one that said longer and smaller is, is the winner, 'cause that's the most important thing to do.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. Okay. So yeah, longer and smaller, and then he said, with, in terms of leaders, and then secondarily was to go subsurface. So, Steven Sykes in Silver Spring, Maryland, had the correct answer there. Go longer and smaller in terms of leaders. So Steven, you just won yourself a book and if you will fill out that same form and send me your mailing address, and I've got your email, I've got your name.

Send me your mailing, your shipping address, and we'll get, uh, Stackpole to send you out a copy of Jake's book, Favorite Flies for Smallmouth Bass. And he's in the neighborhood where there's some smallmouth fishing, right, Jake?

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah, he's not far.

**D. Roger Maves:** He's not far. [01:21:00] That's Jake's old stomping grounds in Maryland there, so-

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah. That'd be great ...

**D. Roger Maves:** You'll have to go hook up together over there. Congratulations, Steven, for paying attention, and we'll get that book off to you as soon as you get that information sent over to us.

Jake Hey, thank you so much for being on the show again with us. It's, it's a pleasure to have you always and your wealth of information, and thanks for sharing with us tonight.

**Jake Villwock:** Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for having me again. I appreciate it.

**D. Roger Maves:** No problem, always.

Hopefully you've all found our podcast archive on our website. If you haven't, just look for the link on the top line menu. In the archive, you'll find all of our past shows, over four hundred and forty shows, something like that now.

You can search by keyword, keyword phrase. You can search by Jake and Jake Villwock and you'll find his past show that we did a while back. So you might enjoy listening to that on Smallmouth as well. And our next show is going to be on June 10th, 7:00 PM Mountain, 9:00 PM Eastern Time. And on that show, I'm gonna [01:22:00] interview Greg Vinci, and our show's gonna be A Fly Fisher's Road Trip Across California.

So I want you to listen in as Greg provides an unforgettable fly fishing road trip across California as we explore all the waters featured in his book, Complete Guide to California Fly Fishing. From the rugged Southern Cascades to coastal streams and the legendary rivers and lakes of the Sierras, west and east slopes, Greg shares the destination tactics, hatches, hidden gems every fly angler should know.

Whether you're planning your next adventure or simply love California trout water, this episode's packed with insight and inspiration. So just add this to your, uh, show to your calendar, and you'll be all set to go.

I'd like to thank Fly Fishers International, Trout Unlimited, Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, Olympic Peninsula Skagit Tactics, The Ugly Bug Fly Shop, and Watermaster for sponsoring our show tonight.

Don't forget to visit our website at [askaboutflyfishing.com](http://askaboutflyfishing.com), and make sure you sign up to receive our announcements so you don't miss out on any of our [01:23:00] future live broadcasts. Thanks for listening to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio. We hope you enjoyed the show. That's it. Good night everyone, and good fishing.