

# OHIO BRUSH CREEK: SOLITUDE & SMALLMOUTHS



Plenty of natural forage, such as crawdads and hellgrammites, provide a healthy habitat for Ohio Brush's smallmouths. Photo by Mike Moore

By Mike Moore  
Editor

**A** smallmouth bass broke the surface of the shallows of Ohio Brush Creek, a flash of white belly and green flesh looking for a deeper drink of water.

It was Memorial Day weekend and I had made the trip south to fish the famed smallmouth waters with local Tom Cross, an outdoor writer and the newly installed director of the Adams County Travel and Visitors Bureau.

The meandering, wooded stream is a series of shallow riffles and deep holes, indicative

of the region's stream smallmouth anglers, canoers, and campers come to get away from the busy city (Cincinnati is but 60 miles to the east).

That's precisely the reason Cross calls this place home, having spent his entire life in the countryside outside of the small town of Cherry Fork. The remote region is characterized by steep ridge tops occupied by mixed oak forest and valleys with beech maple forests.

"I like a serious dose of solitude when I go fishing," said Cross as he baited his fly line on a dusty farm road along the creek.

Brush Creek fits the bill. Deep in the heart of southern Ohio, it's not easy to get to in most places and once you get there it's not that easy to get out, either.



Picturesque Ohio Brush Creek lies at the dividing line between the Plains and the edge of the Appalachian plateau in southern Ohio. Photo by Mike Moore

of the many streams in the Kentucky Bluegrass region of the state that in one place or another lead to the Ohio River. Other streams in the region include Eagle Creek, White Oak, Bullskin, Straight Creek, and Big Indian.

This is hill country in Ohio, the dividing line between the Plains and the edge of the Appalachian plateau.

Brush Creek rises in southeastern Highland County and flows generally southward into Adams County, past Serpent Mound to its confluence with the Ohio River about four miles west of the town of Rome.

Buzzardroost Rock, and the Wilderness Preserve, are registered National Natural Landmarks. The preserve is open year around.

While it may not appear easy to find, State Route 32 is a major, four-lane highway that cuts through the heart of Ohio Brush Creek country. The east-west route runs from Athens to Cincinnati.

Once you do get there, there's several public access points near the mouth of the Ohio River particularly.

"If you want to do something really neat, take a motor boat and launch it at the boat ramp right off U.S. 52, right down there close to the mouth of the Ohio River," said Doug Maloney, the DNR Division of Wildlife's fisheries supervisor in southwest Ohio. "Go upstream as far as you can until you hit bottom. You'll go about 3 1/2 to 4 miles in that backwater area and you'll swear you're not in Ohio. It's just spectacular."

On Ohio Brush Creek itself, you'll find a limestone-based stream bed rich in nutrients. During low-water periods, patches of vegetation pop up here and there and traversing the mostly shallow stream bed is not a problem in most places.

Cross and I strapped on the waders on Memorial Day and after a hike along the steep bank made our way down to the water in search of some smallmouth bass. Armed with an ultralight spinning outfit and a camera strapped to my back, we walked several miles along the creek, casting spinnerbaits and flies into pools here and there.

"It's almost like turkey hunting," said Cross. "You have to be quiet when you come up on these pools."

If the fish don't hear you coming, it's likely that they can see you. With the absence of rain, the water is so clear it's like casting in an aquarium. It's sight fishing at its best. From a higher vantage point at creek-side, you can see most everything that lives in Ohio Brush Creek, including smallmouth, longnose gar, and the dark-skinned carp that pop out as if they're on a radar screen.

Before long, it's easy to see why a smallmouth bass would like this place. Crawdads and

outstanding smallmouth habitat," Petering said.

"Smallmouths prefer that rocky kind of substrate ... My experience is that it doesn't get any better than those southern Ohio (tributaries) to the Ohio River.

On my particular trip, we caught and released a handful of smallmouth bass, mostly smaller fish in the 9- to 11-inch range. If you're looking for size, don't expect a stringer full of bass that would rival a trip on Lake Erie. But for the view, it can't be beat in most places.

"You're not going to catch 5- and 6-pound smallmouths in those streams," Petering attested. "You're average fish is probably going to run about 8 to 12 inches, but gosh you can catch them until you're just sick of it."

For more information about anything in the Adams County area, phone the visitor's bureau at 937-544-5454, toll free at 877-ADAMSOFH.

To reach the Nature Conservancy's Edge of Appalachia Preserve, follow State Route 41 south to West Union. Turn east (left) onto State Route 125 and drive about 10 miles toward the village of Lynx. To reach the preserve office, turn south (right) onto Waggoner Riffle Road, the first road east of the State Route 125 bridge over Ohio Brush Creek. The preserve office is at 3223 Waggoner Riffle Road about 2 1/2 miles south of State Route 125.



hellgrammites are easily awakened by the lifting of a rock here and there.

Surveys conducted in the 1980s, according to Maloney, showed Ohio Brush Creek to be rich in diversity of fish species.

"We shocked up a lot of smallmouth," said Maloney. "But, there's also good numbers of largemouth and decent numbers of spotted bass mixed in. You're likely going to bump into all three."

Ray Petering, the state's top fisheries biologist, said as a high schooler in Cincinnati he frequently made the 40-mile drive into Adams and Brown counties to fish White Oak and Straight creeks in particular.

"The limestone bedrock is just