



Something Old, Something New

A New River Experience

Story and photos by
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There are older rivers in the world than the New River. One actually—the Nile. And there are newer rivers—all the rest of them. And there may be lovelier rivers than the New River, but I haven't seen one yet. The New River is Virginia's most amazing and most underutilized resource. It's a place of supreme serenity, clean rushing water,

jagged peaks, an army of wildlife and fish of all descriptions. Most notably, however, the New River is noted for smallmouth bass, the black warrior of rushing water. The greatest fish that swims.

Lee Graves, the outdoor editor for the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, and I had been invited on a float trip down the

New River this past summer with one of Virginia's premiere guides, Perch Maynard. I have refused bird hunts before. I have declined to accept trips on the Chesapeake Bay, as well as offshore jaunts for tuna fish. I have turned down offers to dove hunt and to chase spring gobblers on an April morn, but I have never refused an opportunity to float fish



Canoeists brace for upcoming rapids

Preparing to launch in Perch Maynard's 16-foot Moravia raft



the New River. Lee and I said an emphatic, “Yes” to Perch Maynard, our guide *du jour*.

Perch Maynard hails from Staffordsville and fishes up and down the New River, which interestingly flows north, not south. The New begins its north-

ward quest in the mountains of North Carolina, twists through the western part of Virginia, enters West Virginia near Rich Creek and ultimately dumps into the Mississippi River. All other major Virginia rivers end up in the Chesapeake Bay.

After exchanging pleasantries over some sausage and eggs biscuits at the “House of Hardee’s” in Pearisburg, Lee, Perch and I were off to the river. Maynard fishes out of a roomy, 16-foot Moravia rubber raft. The boat is dry and comfortable and negotiates the toughest rapids with ease. And there are some difficult rapids in the New River, white-knuckle kinds of places that remind a man of his fragile mortality. Early that morning we saw an armada of a dozen canoes hit a whitewater spot and only four crafts ended up making it through with the keel still in the water.

Our raft, however, slipped through the exploding froth like a snake through marsh reeds. I was in the bow and stayed bone dry the whole time. Didn’t even get my blueberry muffin wet. The fish in the New River apparently aren’t “morning persons.” I’ve floated the New on a half dozen occasions and each time, I’ve caught just a few fish in the morning with the greatest success in the afternoons. This would be the case again as Lee and I put 17 smallmouth in the boat before our noon shore lunch, and then caught 44 more that afternoon.

One of the fish that we should have caught, but didn’t, was a big muskie that smashed a spinner bait about a half hour into our trip. The big ‘un, maybe 16 or 18 pounds, surfaced and threw the hook at the boat. An hour later, a smaller muskie repeated the identical escape tactic and we had two more muskies swerve at the baits without connecting that afternoon. Still, we finished with a total of 61 smallmouth landed, and it’s hard to say how many we lost.

The New River is full of small-mouth bass. Time was that folks said the New River had the numbers, while the James produced larger fish. I’m not sure that’s still the case. And Lee Graves would



Lee Graves proudly displays a citation New River smallmouth.

A late fall bronzeback from the New River
(Photo by Tom Maynard)

certainly agree. He put a handsome 4 1/2 pound citation smack dab in the bottom of Perch Maynard's net. For Lee, it was his biggest smallmouth ever, certainly a fish to be proud of. We caught a variety of sizes of smallmouth. I caught one that couldn't have been more than 4 inches, probably spawned in June. And we caught lots of two-year old fish from 8 to 10 inches along



with 13 and 14 inch class fish, as well as some in the 16-inch range. A variety of sizes of fish in a river indicates good recruitment over a long period of time.

The protective gates of Claytor Lake Dam upriver help prevent the June floods that often decimate smallmouth populations in other rivers. The New has

high water, certainly, but not to the extent of the James, Potomac, Rappahannock and Shenandoah rivers. New River anglers should bring a variety of baits and lures to include Senko worms, Yamamoto grubs, Gitzit's, Zoom Flukes, Pop R's, Tiny Torps, white and chartreuse spinner baits, buzz baits and pig 'n jigs. Or they can just pick up the phone, dial 540-921-4407, get Perch Maynard on the line, book a trip and let him bring all the gear and do all the work. He'll even bring the rods and reels and any muskie equipment necessary. He makes a mean shore lunch, too.

The New River – with the exception of the brutally cold weather in late January and February – fishes well all year long. The winter bite often produces the biggest smallmouth of the year, along with some monster muskies. Also in winter, there is some terrific walleye fishing on the upper New River. This is an awesome river, indeed. One of the best there is. *For more information on current New River conditions, pull up Maynard's web site at www.newriverangler.com.*

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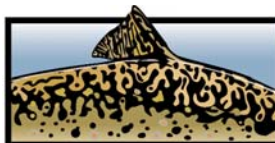
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