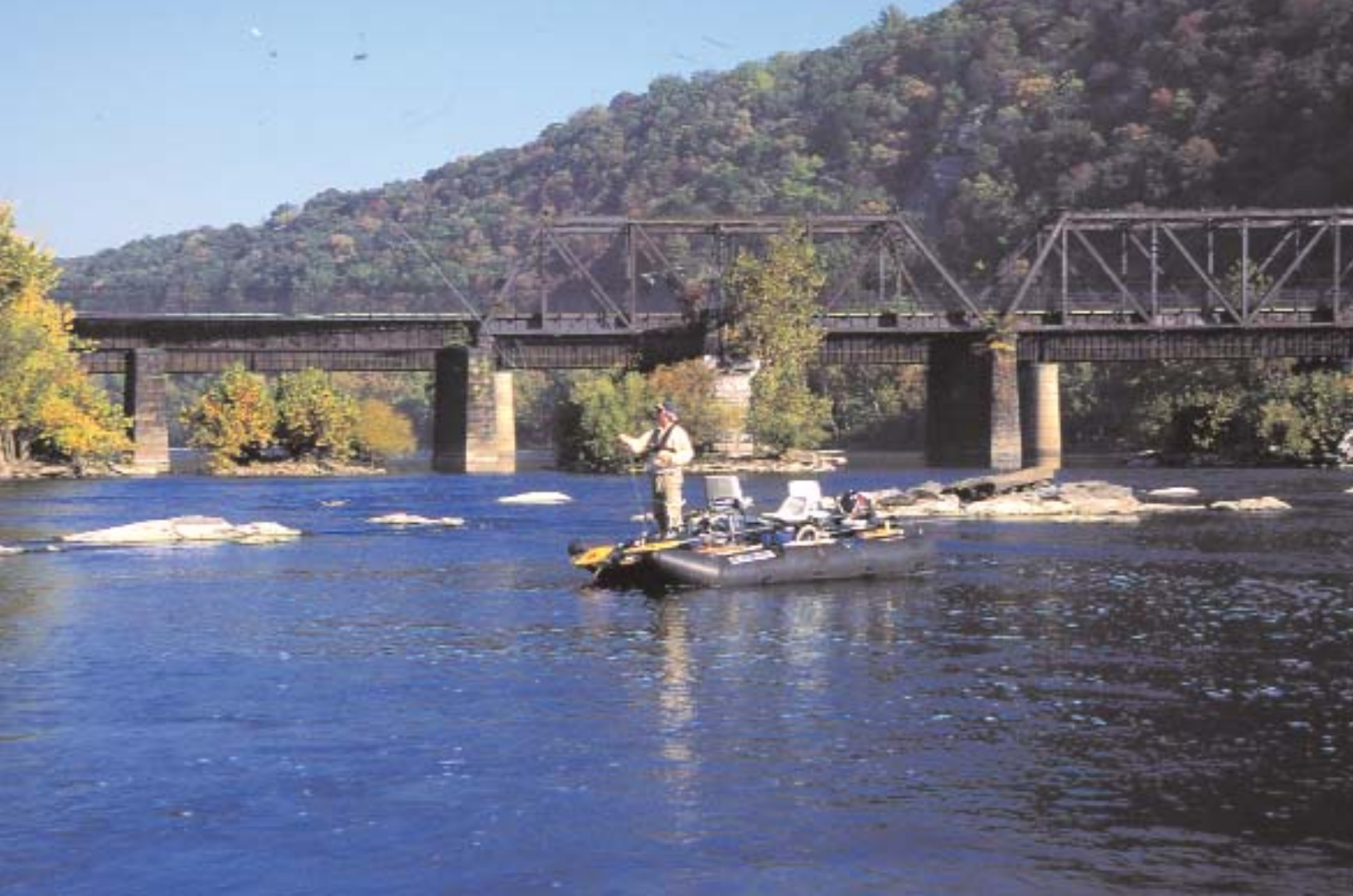




THE NATION'S RIVER:  
**The Upper Potomac**

by

King Montgomery



The Upper Potomac has natural fish-holding structure and man-made structure, such as bridge pilings, that attract smallmouth bass.

**F**rom its source high in the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia, to Point Lookout, Maryland and Smith Point, Virginia at its mouth on the Chesapeake Bay, the Potomac River flows through 383 miles of American history, and provides some excellent fishing along the way. Coldwater trout ply the higher reaches then give way to warmwater smallmouth bass until the Potomac reaches Great and Little Falls, and becomes an imposing, majestic tidal river. For much of its tidal freshwater stretch, the largemouth bass is king, until the saltwater intrudes from the Chesapeake Bay. Striped bass, knowing no salinity boundaries, range throughout the river up to the fall line in Washington, D.C., and, as the river nears its juncture with the Bay, saltwater species such as bluefish, spot, and croaker, prevail. The upper Potomac runs from Paw Paw, West Virginia to Great Falls, Virginia,

a course of 275 miles.

Several miles east of Leesburg on the upper Potomac River, Harrison's Island splits the Potomac into two channels—one along the Maryland side, and the other lapping Virginia's shore. Less than a mile above the northern tip of the island you come to White's Ferry, both a locale and a ferry

that connects the two states. We launched here at daybreak this fine morning. Our leisurely fishing trip would take us about five miles south to Edward's Ferry, now defunct as a conveyance, but, like White's Ferry, active during the American Civil War, 137 years ago. It is hard to imagine now, but this area, on the Virginia side of the river, was the scene of one of the earlier battles of the war.

**Upper Potomac River smallmouth bass greedily strike topwater lures and flies in the warmer months of the year.**



*As far as Civil War battles go, Ball's Bluff, fought on October 21, 1861, wasn't much of one; not like the First Battle of Manassas (Bull Run) three months before and the major mutual slaughters that followed in later years. And yet, though small in terms of soldiers actively engaged, about 1,700 on each side, the repercussions of the Union defeat at Ball's Bluff proved significant. The South's relatively easy victory, close on the heels of the Union loss at Bull Run, bolstered hopes for a*



*strong Confederacy, and further weakened Union hopes for a quick end to the war. In the battle, Colonel Edward “Ned” Baker commanded the 71<sup>st</sup> Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment. Baker, a U.S. Senator and boyhood friend of Abraham Lincoln, was killed. And though the battle may not be famous, some of the names involved in it are: Lieutenant Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., 20<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, a future Justice of the Supreme Court, was seriously wounded by two musket balls. Major Paul Joseph Revere, grandson of the Revolutionary War patriot and also from the 20<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, was captured.*

Today, the sun was just beginning its climb, lighting pink ribbons across the morning sky. A flock of Canada geese headed south, flying in loose formation low to the water. Tim Freese, my friend and guide for the day, turned off the jet outboard motor and we drifted slowly and quietly toward

Harrison’s Island. I was taking in the calm beauty of sunrise when Tim, who had cast a Tiny Torpedo surface lure toward midstream, whooped as he set the hook on a feisty smallmouth bass. My hastily cast fly rod popper soon accomplished the same.

According to noted angling guide and author Ken Penrod in his book *Fishing the Upper Potomac River*, the smallmouth bass is not native to the Potomac watershed. “It is said that an employee of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad carried twenty smallmouth bass in milk cans from the

**Smallmouth bass are plentiful and healthy in the Upper Potomac River**





**Crappie, bluegill, and other sunfishes are plentiful in the upper Potomac River and its tributaries.**



Wheeling River near Wheeling, West Virginia, via train and deposited them into the Potomac near Cumberland, Maryland in 1853.” Stories of this type for many rivers are told all over the country. Virginians can be glad these railroaders brought bronzebacks to the Potomac, Rappahannock, and Shenandoah Rivers.

The river supports a diverse population of game and non-game fishes. Channel catfish and bullheads join the prolific members of the sunfishes, including smallmouth and some largemouth bass, bluegills, shellcrackers (reardear sunfish), redbreast sunfish, pumpkinseed sunfish, and rock bass,

also called red-eye and goggle-eye. Carp are abundant and there are several species of minnows, shiners, fallfishes, suckers, and daces. But on that memorable fall day in 1861, no one was thinking about fish.

*As the Federal forces moved down Ball’s Bluff toward Leesburg, Colonel Nathan G. Evans hurried formations to stop them. The first regiment to attack the Massachusetts troops was Colonel Eppa Hunton’s 8<sup>th</sup> Virginia Infantry, a regiment comprised mostly of Virginia boys from Loudon and Fairfax counties. A southern officer on the scene described the regiment as, “375 more people in bad temper.” That temper would be severely taken out on the Union soldiers as the day progressed. The Federal forces were beaten back to the high bluffs overlooking the Potomac, the battle turned to rout, and hundreds of Union soldiers were captured, shot, or drowned as they tried to flee across the rain-swollen river to the safety of Harrison’s Island.*

#### **Habitat**

The river is quiet now. The upper Potomac River is strewn with large rocks and terraced with rock ledges. This geological factor severely hindered the digging of the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal in colonial times, but today it constitutes the main natural structure that smallmouth bass

seek. Find the rocks, preferably with deeper water nearby, and you’ve found the fish.

Water stargrass and other aquatic vegetation is another fish attractor on the river, particularly where it grows near rocks or ledges. The heavy floods of five or six years ago scoured the bottom clean of most vegetation, but the last several years of low rainfall and clear water have stimulated a resurgence of aquatic plant growth. Recent rains has helped to raise the water level; this is good news after all those drought years.

The floods also deposited some uprooted trees in the river and dropped hundreds along the banks. The tangled branches in the water provide food and cover for many creatures on the lower end of the food chain, and the bass and other sunfishes hunt and hide here. Look for trees adjacent to dropoffs into deeper water.

Man-made structure consists mostly of bridge pilings that support the road and rail bridges across the river. The various sunfishes—primarily bluegill, redbreast sunfish, and crappie—congregate along the pilings on the down current side. Trees invariably hang up on the abutments during high water, and this marriage of natural and man-made structure makes an unbeatable combination for holding fish.

*Soldiers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Virginia, the 71<sup>st</sup> Pennsylvania, and the 20<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts regiments would face each other again in battle at Gettysburg on July 3, 1863, the bloodiest battle of the war, and the beginning of the end for the South. The 8<sup>th</sup> Virginia shattered itself against the 71<sup>st</sup> Pennsylvania and 20<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts as part of General George Pickett’s ill-fated charge against the strong Union line on*



*Cemetery Ridge.*

When you fish the upper Potomac River, pause now and then. Take in the sights and sounds of nature in its glory, and see the story of America written on the river. Picture the barges along the C&O Canal which closely follows the river, and hear the muskets of Washington's troops as they fired on the British. Listen for the sounds of the cannon, the beating hooves of horses, and the cries of men from both sides as they fought and died along the river during the American Civil War. This is the Nation's River, and the songs of nature mingle with the echoes of history as it flows along its course.

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King Montgomery is an award-winning outdoor writer and photographer from Burke, VA.

**Information**

**Tim Freese, *Smallmouth Specialists***  
(703) 443-9050.

**Mark Kovach *Fishing Services***, Silver Spring, MD, (301) 588-8742.

***Fishing the Upper Potomac River*** by fishing guide Ken Penrod can be found in many fly shops, and tackle and sporting goods stores, or call (301) 937-0010, or see [www.penrodguides.com](http://www.penrodguides.com) to order/get information on guided fishing trips.

**Jeff Kelble, *Playing Hookie Guide Service***, (703) 243-5389, [www.fishinginvirginia.net](http://www.fishinginvirginia.net).

**Lee Baihly's *River & Trail Outfitters*** in Knoxville, MD, rents canoes and arranges shuttles for rafters/boaters, (301) 695-5177.

**Maps: *DeLorme Maryland, Virginia, or West Virginia Atlas & Gazetteer*** show the Harpers Ferry area. Call (207) 846-7000 or see [www.delorme.com](http://www.delorme.com) for more information. ***GMCO*** (1-800-420-6277) has a neat waterproof map of the river marked with good fishing spots. The ***Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin*** has a 5 sheet map set that shows historic sites along the river. Write them for information at Suite 300, 6110 Executive Blvd., Rockville, MD 20852.

**Lodging:** Angler's Inn, Harpers Ferry, WV, (304) 535-1239. Innkeeper Bryan Kelly guides light tackle fishing trips from a drift boat.

**Ball's Bluff Regional Park** is part of the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (NVRPA) system. For more information, call them at (703) 352-5900. The best reference for the battle is Kim Bernard Holien's *Battle at Ball's Bluff*. The book can be ordered by sending a check for \$23 to NVRPA, ATTN: Ball's Bluff, 5400 Ox Road, Fairfax Station, VA 22039.

Virginia and Maryland have a reciprocal agreement so your Virginia freshwater fishing license is valid on the upper and tidal Potomac River where it forms the border.



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