

Fishing Tennessee's River of Death

BASS Destination, ESPN Bassmaster

By Bruce Ingram
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The Indians native to Northeast Tennessee may have called their home river "the river of death" or, in their language, the "Nolichucky." But to stream smallmouth fans today, the waterway presents quite a different image, says regional fisheries biologist Rick Bivens of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency.

"For the most part, the Upper Nolichucky is a very good river to fish from a canoe," he says. "The exception would be the three or so miles from the North Carolina state line to Chestoah, where Class IV rapids occur, making it famous for whitewater rafting and for walk-in-type smallmouth fishing in an isolated gorge. For the six miles from Chestoah to Embreeville, the Nolichucky is a Blue Ridge Mountain-type river with Class II+ rapids."

For the 30 or so miles from Embreeville to the backwaters of Davy Crockett State Park, continues Bivens, the Nolichucky slows its pace and is a ridge-and-valley-type river that offers quality smallmouth bass fishing and outstanding scenery.

Larry Self, a part-time guide from Greeneville, maintains that the best fishing often takes place between Jonesborough, Erwin and Greeneville. Play connect-a-dot with those towns, he explains, and the triangle that forms would represent the heart of the smallmouth action. "As far as Tennessee rivers go, the French Broad and Pigeon probably produce the biggest smallmouth, but the Nolichucky probably offers the most consistency in terms of quality size bass," says Self. "The biggest reason the Nolichucky is so productive is the river's limited access. I also would argue that the limited access is the river's biggest strength."

Nestor LeVotch, who operates Mountain Rivers Guide Service in Jonesborough, Tenn., prefers the spring and summer months to ply the waterway. "The Nolichucky is fed by a lot of upland creeks in North Carolina and Tennessee. In many years, the smallmouth don't begin to turn on until early April," he says. "From April throughout the summer, a fisherman can expect to tangle with a 3 ½- to 4-pound smallmouth on any given trip. But what I like best about the river is its number of quality 2-pound fish."

LeVotch lists three particular trips as his favorites. The first is a six-and-a-half-miler from Nolichucky Adventures off Route 81 to the River View Bait Shop at the Highway 81-107 Bridge. The second trip begins at the bridge and extends eight miles downstream to Bailey Bridge on Bailey Bridge Road. A third possibility is a 12-miler from Bailey Bridge to the public ramp at Davy Crockett State Park. Self adds the nine-miler from the state park ramp to the public ramp at Kinser Park in Greene County, just above the dam. All of these trips are very scenic with a great deal of wildlife along the way, emphasizes Self.



Canoes can navigate much of the Nolichucky, but a good raft is recommended for some of the rougher sections, which also offer excellent smallmouth fishing.

Below Davy Crockett Lake Dam, Self says the floats from below the Route 70 Bridge to the Route 321 Bridge (8.5 miles) and Route 321 Bridge to Easterly Bridge on Whittenburg Road (three miles) are excellent. Also outstanding are the junkets from Easterly Bridge on Whittenburg Road to Hale Bridge (eight miles) near Pates Hill, and Hale Bridge to Hale Road Bridge or Brier Thicket (14 miles). The latter float may require camping out near the river and gaining landowner permission to do so. Self maintains that several baits stand out for spring success.

"On the Nolichucky, I've caught more smallmouth with 3-inch grubs on 1/8-ounce jigheads than on anything else," he says. "Smoke, chartreuse, pumpkinseed and yellow are all guaranteed brown fish-getters, and that's an all-year deal. Grubs can be fished up against the bank, where most smallies are found in early spring. In late spring, work grubs in and out of shoals or below them, or parallel to bluffs.

"My second favorite bait is a 1/2-ounce short-armed spinnerbait made locally by Ken Ricker. Ricker's spinnerbait resembles a river-type baitfish and is deadly when ripped 3 or 4 inches under the surface. Fish the spinnerbait along bluffs, in pools, eddies below shoals or underneath overhanging trees." The guide lists Ricker's 1/8- or 1/16-ounce hair jigs or Gripper hair and rubber models, both tipped with small plastic trailers, as other spring options. Self varies the speed of his retrieve until he learns what the bass prefer.

For summertime action, a shade and topwater pattern is hard to beat, insists LeVotch.

"Let's assume it is a typical summertime day. Then, the best places to fish would be all types of overhangs, whether they be undercut banks, limbs or boulders that create shade beneath them," says LeVotch. "Logs and stumps that throw shade are just as good. Toss topwater lures such as a Devil's Horse, Zara Spook or Puppy, Dalton Special, Tiny Torpedo or a Hula Popper to that shade. "If the fish are herding minnows beneath the surface, go with No. 7 and No. 9 Shad Raps and 3-inch A.C. Shiners. Look for the smallmouth to feed near rock ledges and dropoffs along sand bottoms."

Capt'n Jack West, a guide out of Johnson City, explains that three major fall patterns exist. Throughout much of the fall, crawfish are quite active in the Nolichucky, so the guide employs Rebel Crawfish and craw-colored Rapala Shad Raps. When the bass are chasing minnows under the surface, West opts for Team Daiwa Minnows and 3 5/8-inch YoZuri Crystal Minnows. And if a cold front strikes, West ventures deep with split shot Case Mad Toms, and Hellgrammites rigged Texas style.

This past Memorial Day weekend, I floated with West and Brian Wright of Bristol, Va., from Bailey Bridge to Davy Crockett State Park. Despite the fact that we were on the river during a holiday weekend, we only saw two other anglers. And the fishing was superb, too. Wright dueled with a pair of 20-inch smallmouth that fell for tube baits, while West and I battled bass in the 12- to-17-inch range on tubes and 3-inch Kalin grubs, respectively. The majestic cliffs, wooded hillsides and isolated nature of the excursion enhanced the experience. The Indians may have called the Nolichucky the river of death, but modern day adventurers may want to use another phrase to describe the stream — a smallmouth paradise.

Trip check report

How to get there — The Nolichucky flows through northeast Tennessee, near the communities of Jonesborough, Erwin and Greeneville. Interstate-81 and Routes 81, 107, 70 and 321 offer access.

When to go — Early April through late summer; fall can be quite good if rainfall has been adequate.

Best lures & techniques — In early spring, 3-inch grubs on 1/8-ounce jigheads are hard to beat. Also fish ½-ounce spinnerbaits just under the surface. Swimming a hair jig through shoals is also deadly. During summer, topwater baits perform well. When fish are not feeding on the surface, use Shad Rap crankbaits and 3-inch A.C. Shiners. For fall bassing, try Rebel Crawfish and craw-colored Shad Raps, jerkbaits and split shot Case Mad Toms and Hellgrammites, and work them slowly through rocky pools.

Information — Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, 423-587-7037, www.state.tn.us/twra; Historic Jonesborough Tourism Cooperative, 877-913-1612, <http://www.historicjonesborough.com/>.

Accommodations — Eureka Hotel, 877-734-6100; Hawley House B&B, 800-753-8869; May-Ledbetter House, 423-753-7568, all in Jonesborough.

Fishing information/guides — Nestor LeVotch of Mountain Rivers Guide Service, 423-753-9190. Capt'n Jack West, 423-926-8539. Larry Self Outdoors, 423-422-7553.

Maps — Tennessee Atlas & Gazetteer, DeLorme, 800-227-1656. Bruce Ingram is the author of "The James River Guide: Fishing and Floating on Virginia's Finest" and "The New River Guide." Copies are available from ECOPRESS, (800) 326-9272.