

Easy Going - Wisconsin's Northwoods

by Michael J. Dunn, III

Fish & Fishing

For either the serious angler or the family just taking the kids out to humor them, the counties of Vilas and Oneida have the right fish and fishing.

An idea of the importance of fishing in the recreation picture can be gained just from the fishing contests in the area: season-long countywide contests, local competitions, individual sport shops' contests, even special promotions like the World Championship Musky Classic (Boulder Junction, Manitowish Waters, Presque Isle, Winchester) or the celebrity-starring World Musky Hunt. In a variation of the contest theme, St. Germain has a Muskies for Tomorrow program that rewards sportsmen who throw back their keeper muskies.

Another index of fishing's popularity is the abundance of bait and tackle shops, guides, and taxidermists. A good sport shop can be a big help to the fisherman for, in addition to offering equipment, it can also advise on conditions and recommend a guide and perhaps a taxidermist to mount a prize catch.

A day with a fishing guide can be a wise investment, particularly for fishermen with limited time. He offers good company, expertise, and a better chance for fishing success. One guide who keeps a journal recorded in a recent season's 1,087 hours of fishing a major strike every 40 minutes and a keeper musky every 11.3 hours.

The DNR helps ensure a supply of fish with both its fish plantings and its fisheries research. Each spring DNR personnel net walleyes and muskies in area lakes, gently milk them for milt and eggs, and return them to the waters. Freshly fertilized eggs thus obtained are incubated and reared over the summer in the Woodruff hatchery and outdoor ponds and then planted in lakes as fingerlings or even, in the case of muskies, eight- to 12-inch fish. Visitors are welcome to watch the milking from their own boats and to visit the hatchery and ponds.

The DNR has also operated, for over 20 years, a five-lake experiment station east of Trout Lake at Escanaba Lake. Here fishing with no bag or size limits is allowed all year, in return for a tally of each fisherman's catch. The project, formally entitled the Northern Highland Fishery Research Project, has helped study whether fishing pressure can "fish out" a lake, and has allowed the DNR to experiment with fish planting under controlled conditions, including sterilizing lakes and replanting them with new species.

These five lakes are popular in winter, as are many other northland lakes whose ice on weekends is dotted with colorfully garbed fishermen huddled over their holes or little warming fires. Shacks are popular too.

The Vilas and Oneida fishery includes all the expected species along with a few offbeat surprises. Very popular are panfish like perch or crappies (less large here than in more fertile waters downstate); sporty fish like scrappy smallmouth bass (found also in streams like the Wisconsin, Pelican, and Tomahawk rivers) and the more common largemouth; and the northern pike.

Most prized are the walleye and the theatrical musky. The two counties contain 352 musky lakes, 203 of them classed by the DNR as prime (Class A). One notion of what lakes produce muskies is available through a glance at results of a dozen years of Vilas County's annual musky marathon, which in that time produced 16,000 registered fish aggregating 99 tons and almost 9.9 miles in length. The lakes that consistently produced the most Vilas County muskies were Little and Big Arbor Vitae, Lac Vieux Desert, and Little St. Germain; following these were such lakes as Muskellunge, Star, Plum, High, Bip, and chains around Boulder, Manitowish, and Flambeau lakes. From 1947 to 1949 Vilas boasted the world's record musky, a 64-pounder from little Halfway Lake near Lac du Flambeau.

Brown or brook trout occur naturally or have been planted in 76 streams and four lakes in Oneida, 33 streams and 14 lakes in Vilas. Spring ponds are also possible trout spouts, But, none are really accessible. (Rainbows occur only in the Deerskin River and 14 lakes in Vilas.) The speckled-lake trout hybrid splake has been planted in a few lakes like Little Bass in northern Oneida, while Stormy Lake (Vilas) has coho, and Trout, Crystal, and Black Oak lakes (all Vilas) have lake trout.

Benson Lake, a widening of Manitowish Waters's river of the same name, is popular for sturgeon during the early fall season; it gave up a 67-incher to an acquaintance of mine in 1977. As a contrast, smelt, among the smallest of catchable fish, recently turned up in Fence Lake, Lac du Flambeau.

The rare sportsman who would rather watch than catch fish can take pleasure in doing so with scuba gear in clear bodies like Crystal or Big Carr lakes.

The DNR has four publications that may aid anglers: booklets 9-3600, 1-3600, 3-3600, and 6-3600, on walleye, musky, and trout lakes, and trout streams, respectively.

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